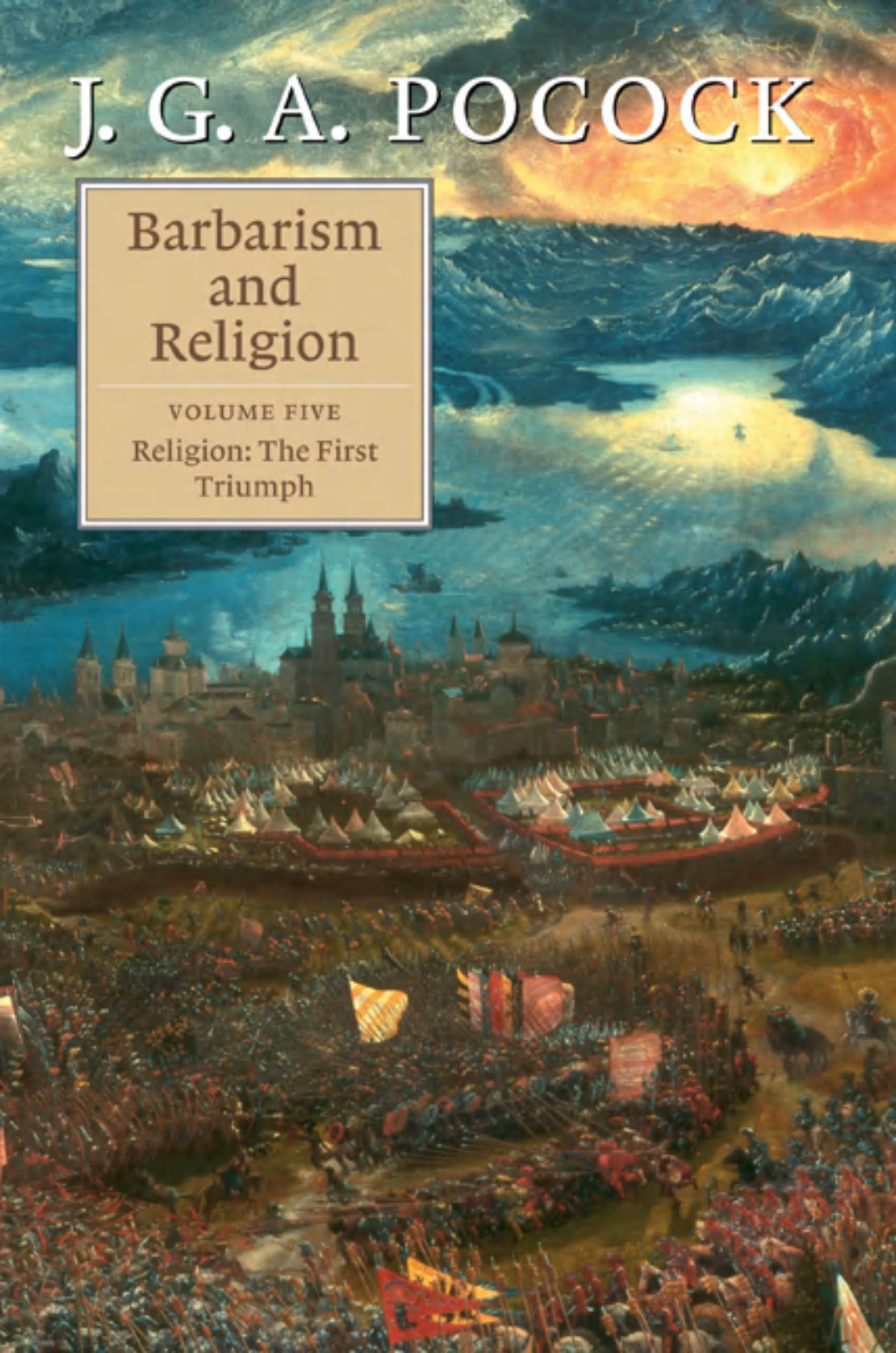

J. G. A. POCOCK
Barbarism and Religion
VOLUME FIVE
Religion: The First Triumph

BARBARISM AND RELIGION

Volume Five

Religion: The First Triumph

This fifth volume in John Pocock's acclaimed sequence on *Barbarism and Religion* turns to religion and the controversy caused by Edward Gibbon's treatment of the early Christian Church. Examining this controversy in unprecedented depth, Pocock challenges the assumption that Gibbon wrote with the intention of destroying belief in the Christian revelation, and questions our understanding of the character of 'enlightenment'. Reconsidering the genesis, inception and reception of these crucial chapters of the *Decline and Fall*, Pocock explores the response of Gibbon's critics, affirming that his reputation as an unbeliever was established before his history of the Church had been written.

The magnitude of *Barbarism and Religion* is already apparent. *Religion: The First Triumph* will be read not just as a remarkable analysis of the making of the *Decline and Fall*, but also as a comment on the collision of belief and disbelief, a subject as pertinent now as it was to Gibbon's eighteenth-century readers.

J. G. A. POCOCK was born in London and brought up in Christchurch, New Zealand, and educated at the Universities of Canterbury and Cambridge. He is now Harry C. Black Professor of History Emeritus at the Johns Hopkins University and an Honorary Fellow of St John's College, Cambridge. His many seminal works on intellectual history include *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (1957, second edition 1987), *Politics, Language and Time* (1971), *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975, second edition 2003), *Virtue, Commerce and History* (1985), *Political Thought and History* (2009) and five volumes in an ongoing sequence, initiated in 1999, on *Barbarism and Religion*. He has also edited *The Political Works of James Harrington* (1977) and *Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1987), as well as the collaborative study *The Varieties of British Political Thought* (1995). A Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy and of the Royal Historical Society, Professor Pocock is also a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and of the American Philosophical Society. He was appointed an Officer of the Order of New Zealand Merit in 2002.

BARBARISM AND RELIGION

Volume Five

Religion: The First Triumph

J. G. A. POCOCK

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websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

The progress of Christianity has been marked by two glorious and decisive victories: over the learned and luxurious citizens of the Roman empire; and over the warlike barbarians of Scythia and Germany, who subverted the empire and embraced the religion of the Romans.

Decline and Fall, chapter 37

To the memory of Richard H. Popkin (1923–2005) and
Joseph M. Levine (1931–2007)

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Preface

The problematics of this volume are set out in the Introduction. It enquires into Gibbon's intentions, and their consequences, in publishing chapters 15 and 16 of the *Decline and Fall* at the end of its first volume in 1776.[1] It raises the question, first asked by a contemporary, of how these chapters are related to his project as a historian, and goes so far as to ask whether he was as yet fully master of his intentions and the means by which he intended to pursue them. It will be a premise of this volume that he was from this point obliged to operate within a long-established context, that of ecclesiastical history, and the first six chapters consist of a study of the major historians in this field of whom he made use.

The primary question asked is what Gibbon intended by publishing two chapters on Christianity before Constantine, before proceeding to its establishment as the religion of empire. The second half of the volume is devoted to the context in which he published these chapters, what history he narrated and began to construct in them, and how his first readers understood and responded to them. This will be the history of a controversy – one which has never yet been studied in detail – and a further affirmation will be that Gibbon's reputation as an unbeliever was established before his history of the Church in the empire had been either written or published. By the time it appeared, his readers were able to assume, not only that he was an unbeliever, but that he was writing history with the intention of destroying Christian belief. This assumption remains current today. There is a history of the *Decline and Fall*'s reception that could be written, recounting how the Christian belief that he was furthering a general 'deist' offensive – one which was indeed going on – mutated into an agnostic belief that he was taking part in just such an offensive, approved of by agnostics under the name of 'Enlightenment'. To this day it remains possible for publishers wishing to introduce their public

[1] For an earlier statement of this enquiry, see FDF, 'Epilogue', pp. 489–500.

to the *Decline and Fall* to select chapters 15 and 16 as the key to the work as a whole, stating the purpose for which it was written.[2]

This volume challenges that selection, largely by challenging the still prevalent assumption that a more or less unified 'Enlightenment' or 'rationalism' was conducting a unified offensive against a Christianity summarised, and too often dismissed, under the single heading of 'orthodoxy' or 'tradition'. Such offensives were indeed going on; but a study of the contexts in which chapters 15 and 16 were written and read, and are to be understood historically, becomes that of a debate as much within Protestant and English Christianity as directed against it. From this we have to learn how Gibbon framed his intentions, whatever they may have been, and how they were read and interpreted, whether or not these interpretations were just.

This context may be termed an 'Enlightenment', though to do so is to accept the premise that this noun may be used in several ways, denoting processes arising from various historical situations, which it may or may not be possible to unite under a single heading. For the present it seems less important to pursue that possibility than to study the various 'Enlightenments' as movements occurred which induce us to call them by that name. In recent scholarship there has developed an interest in the interactions of theories of the origins of society based on natural philosophy with accounts of that process based on Old Testament accounts of the fall of man, the universal deluge and the confusion of tongues.[3] The interaction between these two discourses is proving more complex and rewarding of study than was previously supposed. The origins of the Christian Church, however – the subject with which Gibbon went some way towards involving himself – were based less immediately on the Old Testament than the New. They recounted less the truths revealed to Moses concerning the origins of the world and the history of humanity, than the revelation of God in the person of Christ at a moment in the history of Rome, its empire and Israel after the Captivity concerning which there existed a great many written narratives recounting complex civil histories. The revelation according to Moses could be challenged by providing philosophic natural histories of human society; the revelation of God in Jesus Christ offered to transcend and transform a civil history, already known, which it did not deny. That history could be rewritten with the aid of philosophical concepts of human nature and society, but these did not do away with civil history and its problems. The question regarding Gibbon is whether the history he

[2] E.g. Gibbon, 2004. [3] Robertson, 2005.

offered in chapters 15 and 16 was to be understood as proceeding without reference to a revelation, and whether it offered to explain belief in the revelation of Jesus Christ as a phenomenon in the history of the human mind.

The English – indeed Church of England – Enlightenment in which Gibbon's two chapters were received and perhaps originated was initially a clerical and even conservative movement, in which the revelation and divinity of Jesus need not be denied and were for the most part affirmed and defended. It can be retained within a pattern of Enlightenment by pointing out that the overmastering English need to insist that Christian belief did not overturn civil order led to views of Christ's nature in which grace became subordinate to law, the divine to the human and the Son to the Father. Ancient Arian and modern Socinian doctrines were widely held, and liberal and tolerant attitudes towards the debate over them more widely still. Recoil towards the Trinitarianism still required by law was, however, the regular response to such doctrines, and it is of the greatest importance to remember that even, perhaps especially, those who thought Christ divine in mission rather than substance still considered his performance of miracles and fulfilment of prophecies necessary proofs of his mission. It was common to find unitarians who were also millenarians, and Gibbon's critics demanding that the spread of Christianity be due to its character as revelation were by no means all of the high Trinitarian persuasion.

There were a number of orthodox and less orthodox positions that could be adopted and by no means all of them implied a descent towards unbelief. Beyond them, however, there did lie several such dangers: a unitarianism that denied Christ's divinity altogether, a deism that implied a philosophical monotheism without revelation, an Epicurean or Spinozist merger of spirit with matter, or – probably closest to Gibbon's own position – a Humean scepticism which denied that the human intellect could know God while conceding that it could never be prevented from affirming him. Among all these possibilities the critical intellect might stop where it chose, but could never be free of the suspicion that it meant to go further and all the way. Conyers Middleton was and remains so accused, and so of course was Gibbon. All his critics demanded to know whether he thought the Christian religion had been revealed by God, and nearly all of them concluded, or assumed, that he did not. The debate was complicated, however, by the circumstance that several of them were content with 'evidences' – miracles and prophecies – sufficient to show that a revelation had occurred, without specifying its content or its revelatory force.

Gibbon disturbed his critics by acknowledging revelation in language so minimal as to leave room for the suspicion that he did not believe what he was saying. He obstinately and maliciously observed silence on this matter, and the more he observed it the more his readers assumed that it conveyed, and was intended to convey, an absolute and destructive scepticism on all points of Christian belief. He distinguished between a 'primary' cause for the spread of Christianity – either a revelation or the conviction that one had occurred – and 'secondary' causes, of which some encouraged that conviction while others gave it dynamic force in particular ways, and his critics suspected that they were designed either to replace the primary cause or to explain it away. He adopted a tone which his Christian readers denounced as a 'sneer' and his agnostic admirers have applauded as 'irony'. In both cases – the argument differs very little – the tone is held to operate against all beliefs without significant limits; a consequence of Gibbon's refusal to argue against central beliefs, whatever he might say against the peripheral. The question whether a revelation had occurred was not examined in Gibbon's two chapters.

The reception of these chapters is examined in a chapter of the present work which explores in some detail what his critics in fact said, argued and believed. This study has not, as far as I know, been undertaken in this degree of fullness until now, and it has been rightly pointed out that the tradition of Gibbon scholarship has assumed that these writers, being orthodox, are not to be taken seriously. This volume accords them parity of esteem and studies them in detail because this is how history is supposed to be written. We live at a time when militant theism and atheism are once more in conflict, in which the relevant chapter will no doubt be read as participant; the reader is desired to read it as history. He or she is also reminded that this volume is a study of eighteenth-century discourse on ecclesiastical history. The vast weight and brilliant light of modern scholarship on late antiquity and primitive Christianity does not appear in it because it has other purposes.

The *Rezeptiongeschichte* of the *Decline and Fall* naturally raises the question whether Gibbon's readers interpreted his intentions correctly. Here we encounter the circumstance that his intentions as regards religion were interpreted before his history of the Church had begun, since it is not immediately apparent what his account of the Church before Constantine had to do with his still unwritten history of the Church after him. Several of his critics thought he had merely antedated a slide into corruption and popery which had begun later, and that much of what he said was wholly applicable to a later period. It is therefore a question why he wrote and

published chapters 15 and 16 when and as he did; and this leads into the larger question (first raised by Hugh Blair in April 1776) what his apparent disbelief in Christianity has to do with the history of church and empire he was now beginning to write. The treatment of that question in this volume suggests that it was only in chapter 21, published five years later, that he discovered means of presenting the belief in revelation as historical fact, and that chapter 15 with its separation of primary from secondary causes was a false beginning. The further implication is that it is an error to regard the two chapters of 1776 as the key to the *Decline and Fall* or its central assertion. By chapter 21 he had begun shaping a history of the Christian Church along lines owing much to David Hume, whose unbelief he shared but did not write history to promote. This chapter takes Christian belief seriously without asserting it or its contrary. If he had found ways of adopting that tone in chapter 15, a great deal of critical literature might have remained unwritten.

Acknowledgements

(1)

In writing this book, I have received help of many kinds from many friends and sources. I wish to begin by thanking my graduate assistants, Katherine Moran and Kenneth Sheppard, for their hard work, reliability and generosity in completing the typescript. The History Department of the Johns Hopkins University continued to support this enterprise and make it possible.

The reading and research necessary were carried out in the Special Collections Section of the Milton S. Eisenhower Library of the Johns Hopkins University; the Folger Shakespeare Library and the Library of Congress, in Washington, DC; and the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library of the University of California at Los Angeles. The last-named university appointed me to a Clark Visiting Professorship in the spring of 2002.

I have at different times been able to discuss aspects of this project at the Heyman Center of Columbia University, Harvard University and the University of Chicago, as well as at Johns Hopkins. I owe a special debt to the Provost and Fellows of King's College, Cambridge – in particular Istvan Hont – and to the participants in a work-in-progress seminar I was privileged to conduct for three days in May 2008; and similarly to the Sussex Centre for Intellectual History – in particular Knud Haakonssen and Richard Whatmore – for a workshop at the University of Sussex in the same month. The participants in both made invaluable comments and I thank them for their help and support.

At other times than these I have been able to discuss particular topics and receive criticism and support from many colleagues. They are of course not responsible for what I have done with their counsel. A special place belongs to David Womersley and Brian Young. With them I wish to name Clifford Ando, Christopher Celenza, Jonathan Clark, Patricia

Craddock, Robert Mankin, John Marshall, James Moore, Nicholas Phillipson, Orest Ranum, John Robertson, Andrew Sharp, Patricia Springborg, Mack Walker, Richard Whatmore and Martha Zebrowski.

In conclusion I once again thank Richard Fisher and his staff at the Cambridge University Press for their help and encouragement over the years; and as always my wife, Felicity Pocock, for reading the proofs as well as for more than words can describe.

(II)

This volume is dedicated to the memory of two historians whose lives ended while it was in preparation. Richard Popkin opened up the history of scepticism both Jewish and Christian from Erasmus to Spinoza; Joseph Levine that of humanist scholarship and the relation of ancients to moderns from Erasmus to Gibbon. The presence of each in the text of this volume is so great that references have hardly been necessary and could not have done them justice. I cannot release it to the public without saluting them both.

(III)

Preliminary studies for this volume have appeared from time to time: 'Superstition and enthusiasm in Gibbon's history of religion', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 8, 1 (1982), pp. 83–94; 'Edward Gibbon in history: aspects of the text, in *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. III: religion and philosophy', *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, XI (Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1990), pp. 338–64; 'Il linguaggio della teologia moderata e il *Decline and Fall* di Gibbon', in Marco Geuna and Maria Luisa Pesante (eds.), *Passioni, interessi, convenzioni: discussioni settecenteschi su virtù e civiltà* (Turin, Franco Angeli, 1992), pp. 245–66; 'Within the margins: the definitions of orthodoxy', in Roger D. Lund (ed.), *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response, 1660–1750* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 33–53; 'Enthusiasm: the antiself of Enlightenment', in Lawrence E. Klein and Anthony J. La Vopa (eds.), 'Enthusiasm and Enlightenment in Europe, 1650–1800', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 60, 1–2 (1998), pp. 7–28; 'Gibbon and the primitive church', in Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore and Brian Young (eds.), *History, Religion, and Culture: British Intellectual History, 1750–1950* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 48–68; 'Gibbon and the history of heresy', in John Christian Laursen (ed.), *Histories of Heresy in*

Early Modern Europe: For, Against and Beyond Persecution and Toleration (New York and Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002), pp. 205–20; 'Perceptions of modernity in early modern historical thinking', *Intellectual History Review*, 17, 1 (2007), pp. 55–63; 'Historiography and Enlightenment: a view of their history', *Modern Intellectual History*, 5, 1 (2008), pp. 83–96; 'Gibbon and the invention of Gibbon: chapters 15 and 16 reconsidered', *History of European Ideas*, 35, 2 (2009), pp. 209–16.

I wish to thank the editors of these volumes and journals for the opportunity to develop the theses I here put forward.

Advice to readers

This book is a study of the history of eighteenth-century thinking about the history of the early Christian Church. It does not attempt to make, though it may not escape implying, statements about the latter history or its recent historiography. Readers, Christian or non-believing, who may find themselves involved in analyses of thought they consider obsolete or false, are asked to remember that they are studying the history of a time when such thinking was offered and read seriously. In our time, when theism and atheism are again in direct collision, this warning seems necessary.

Abbreviations

A	*The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon, Printed Verbatim from Hitherto Unpublished MSS, with an Introduction by the Earl of Sheffield*. Edited by John Murray. Second edition. London, John Murray, 1897.
BAM	*Bibliothèque ancienne et moderne. En XXIV Volumes . . . Par Jean Le Clerc*. Amsterdam, 1718–. Geneva, Slatkine Reprints, 1968.
BSE	J. G. A. Pocock: *Barbarism and Religion*, volume IV: *Barbarians, Savages, and Empires*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005.
BUH	Jean Le Clerc: *Bibliothèque universelle et historique. Réimpression de l'édition d'Amsterdam, 1686–1693*. Geneva, Slatkine Reprints, 1968.
DF	Edward Gibbon: *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Cited by volume, chapter and notes.
DNB	*The Dictionary of National Biography*. Edited by Sir Leslie Stephen and Sir Sidney Lee. London, George Smith 1883– ; Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1917– .
De Rebus	J. L. Mosheim: *De Rebus Christianorum ante Constantinum Magnum Commentarii*. Helmstedt, 1753.
EE	Patricia Craddock (ed.): *The English Essays of Edward Gibbon*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972.
EEG	J. G. A. Pocock: *Barbarism and Religion*, volume I: *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

EGLH	Patricia Craddock: *Edward Gibbon, Luminous Historian, 1772–1794*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.
Empereurs	Sebastien Le Nain de Tillemont: *Histoire des empereurs et des autres princes qui ont regné durant les six premiers siècles de l'eglise, de leurs guerres avec les juifs, des écrivains profanes et des personnes illustres des leurs tems*. Second edition, in 3 volumes. Brussels, 1732.
FDF	J. G. A. Pocock: *Barbarism and Religion*, volume III: *The First Decline and Fall*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.
HE	*Historia Ecclesiastica duorum primorum a Christo nato saeculorum a veteribus monumentis depromta a Joanne Clerico*. Amsterdam, 1716.
HMM	Isaac de Beausobre: *Histoire critique de Manichée et du Manichéisme: où l'on trouve aussi l'Histoire de Basilide, de Marcion, de Bardesanes, etc., et de leurs sentimens, et où on découvre l'origine de plusieurs cultes, cérimonies, etc., qui sont introduits dans le christianisme*. 2 volumes: Amsterdam, 1734–9. Facsimile edition, Leipzig, Zentralantiquariat der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1970.
Institutiones	J. L. Mosheim: *Institutionum historiae ecclesiasticae antiquae et recentioris libri quattuor ex ipsis fontibus insigniter emendati, plurimis accessionibus locupletati variis observationibus illustrati*. Helmstedt, 1755.
Journal A	D. M. Low (ed.): *Gibbon's Journal to January 28th, 1763: My Journal I, II, and III, and Ephemerides. With Introductory Essays*. London, Chatto and Windus; New York, W. W. Norton, 1929.
Journal B	Georges A. Bonnard (ed.): *Le journal de Gibbon à Lausanne, 17 août 1763–19 avril 1764*. Lausanne, Librairie de l'Université, 1945.
Letters	J. E. Norton (ed.): *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*. 3 volumes. London, Cassell, 1956.
Library	Geoffrey Keynes (ed.): *The Library of Edward Gibbon*. Second edition. [Godalming], St Paul's Bibliographies, 1980.

Maclaine, 1826	*An Ecclesiastical History, Ancient and Modern: In which the Rise, Progress, and Variations of Church-Power, are Considered in their Connexion with the State of Learning and Philosophy, and the Political History of Europe during that Period: by the Late Learned John Laurence Mosheim, D. D. Chancellor of the University of Göttingen: Translated from the Original Latin . . . by Archibald Maclaine, D. D. A New Edition in Six volumes . . . by Charles Coote, LL.D* . . . . London, Cadell, Rivington et al., 1826.
Mémoires	Sebastien Le Nain de Tillemont: *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire ecclésiastique des six premiers siècles* . . . . 16 volumes. Paris, 1693–1712.
MW	Lord Sheffield (ed.): *The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, Esq., with Memoirs of his Life and Writings, Composed by Himself: Illustrated from his Letters, with Occasional Notes and Narrative. A New Edition, with Considerable Additions*. 5 volumes. London, John Murray, 1814.
NCG	J. G. A. Pocock: *Barbarism and Religion*, volume II: *Narratives of Civil Government*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.
ODNB	*The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Edited by H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008– .
Womersley, 1994	David Womersley (ed.): *Edward Gibbon: The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. 3 volumes. Harmondsworth, Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1994.

Introduction

(1) THE FIELD OF THIS ENQUIRY

This volume, the fifth in its sequence, is focused initially on the last two chapters (numbers 15 and 16) of the first volume of the *Decline and Fall*, published by William Strahan for Edward Gibbon in February and August of 1776; subsequently on the controversy they occasioned during the following five years; finally on a selected chapter (number 21) of the second volume, published in 1781. Within this time-frame and frame of reference, the history Gibbon was studying and the historiography in which he was engaged underwent changes so profound that the *Decline and Fall* may be said to have taken on a new character; and as the reception of his work began in the early months of 1776 and has continued ever since, the *Decline and Fall* began to have a history, shaped by others besides its author and not necessarily that he intended for it. Questions of intention and performance, authorship and readership, come to demand attention; and the *Decline and Fall* begins to emerge from the contexts of eighteenth-century historiography, necessary to the understanding of what Gibbon was doing, to situate itself or be situated in others, necessary to the understanding of what he was taken to have done. The author ceases to be the sole master of his work, even while his mastery over its composition may have been increasing.

All these results follow from a single event or moment: that at which Gibbon's narrative moved into the conceptual universe of Christian history, and both the history he studied and the history he wrote became radically unlike what either had been previously. On one level, his narrative began to be dominated by the advent of a new culture – or system of manners, as he might have said – unlike that of the Rome-based pagan empire whose decline (but not yet fall) he had been relating. Christian empire was a different kind of empire, and its decline and fall must come about for different reasons and be a different process from those so far recounted. The

neo-classical obsession with the loss of ancient virtue could not continue relating the history of actors practising virtue in an altogether different sense, and if Gibbon had had no more to say than that Christianity caused the decline of the empire, he would not have written five volumes of history to say so. The subject that begins to preoccupy him in chapter 15 is the origin and ascendancy of a new culture requiring a new kind of history. He does not have to invent that history or how to write it, however; the culture itself has written it and is still debating it. Whatever Gibbon's ultimate historical intentions regarding Christianity, he cannot escape, and probably did not wish or need to escape, being part of that debated history.

The history and the debate over it – for debatability, however much feared and resented, was its essential characteristic – was as old as the earliest Christian writings; it had a history of its own, which Gibbon was required to learn and which must be understood if we are to understand what Gibbon was doing. It may be seen as consisting of two interwoven strands: sacred history, meaning the history of God's actions in and upon the world, in which a monotheist God crucially intervened by covenant, incarnation or (later in civil history) the prophecy of Muhammad; and ecclesiastical history, meaning that of the human association charged with continuing and interpreting his intervention and his presence. In Judeo-Christian thought – meaning Jewish thought as annexed to Christian – this history is that of the first and second Israels; in Muslim thought it may be that of the *umma*; but the idea of a church (*ecclesia*) is in so many ways integrally Christian – and so variously and intensively debatable – that it is hard to use the term 'ecclesiastical history' in any but a Christian setting. The most powerful links between sacred and ecclesiastical history arose because the idea of a church was inseparable from that of God's presence, and the idea of his presence from that of his nature. The innumerable debates making up Christian ecclesiastical history therefore include, and are dependent on, the history of an unending debate over what had occurred at the Incarnation; though we are to deal with a project, both Protestant and Enlightened, of reducing that debate to the recognition of a simple message, and writing its history as a record of its departures from that recognition. It is this project which will supply us with the context in which Gibbon's chapters on the history of belief must be situated, if we are to understand either their argument or their reception. It need hardly be added that a project of reducing debate was itself debatable and likely to generate further debate.

Both sacred history – a term almost interchangeable with 'theology' – and ecclesiastical history were ancient and controversial disciplines, pursued

by communities of scholars possessed of formidable skills of exegesis and dialectic, long before Gibbon came to engage in them, and it is not easy from the available data to determine the time at which he set himself to master them. A possible, perhaps probable, answer is that he did so by studying the great series of journals put out by the *république des lettres* – those edited by Pierre Bayle, Jean Le Clerc and the Jesuits – in which the output of the printing presses was summarised, excerpted and occasionally reviewed.[1] But these journals belonged to a time two generations before his, and reflect the period, c. 1680–1730, in which the Protestant and Enlightened project just mentioned took shape. At some risk of a hermeneutic circle, therefore, it is possible to suppose that Gibbon learned his Christian history from the sources that were to give it, and even his treatment of it, their controversial character. Certainly, it is not possible to understand the relevant chapters of the *Decline and Fall* without immersing ourselves in that literature. Gibbon sometimes derides it, but his derision is an output of the critical method it taught; and much Enlightened scholarship has been kept superficial by the Enlightened (and Voltairean) error of supposing that what is to be rejected need not be studied. Criticism is unintelligible if we do not know what is being criticised; and irreligion is unintelligible unless we know the possibly complex and sophisticated religion that is being disbelieved.

To understand chapters 15 and 16 of the *Decline and Fall* – their genesis, their intention and their reception – it is necessary to explore a climate of debate, known to Gibbon, to his authorities and to his readers, which had been prevalent in Protestant cultures including England for perhaps a century before these chapters were published. An initial account of that debate will follow. But there is a previous question: why did Gibbon inject himself into the debate, and why did he do so at the point in the writing and publishing of the *Decline and Fall* where we find it?

(ii) the problems of chapters 15 and 16

By the end of his fourteenth chapter, Gibbon had carried the narrative of decline from the flawed golden age of the second-century principate, through the reorganisation of that office by Diocletian and the civil wars among the tetrarchs following his abdication, as far as the victory of Constantine over his competitors. He had done so without any mention of Christianity, which plays not even an invisible role in his history so far; but

[1] EEG, pp. 122, 126, 130; below, pp. 193–4.

he knew he had reached a turning point, and concluded chapter 14 with these words:

> The foundation of Constantinople, and the establishment of the Christian religion, were the immediate and memorable consequences of this revolution.[2]

Standing first, 'the foundation of Constantinople' marks the culmination of that movement of empire to power-centres *alibi quam Romae* which Gibbon tells us had 'started to his mind' as a subject on the steps of the Capitol in 1764. The ancient city will recur in the narrative from time to time, notably when sacked by Alaric in 410 and when the pope proclaims Charlemagne emperor in 800; and after the fall of New Rome in 1453, Gibbon will carry out the intention, proclaimed in his preface of 1776, of returning to the history of medieval Rome. The concluding chapters of the *Decline and Fall* may be mainly picturesque, but they bring full circle the history of empire Gibbon set out to write. The empire governed from Constantinople, however, is culturally as well as geo-politically unlike that of the Antonines from which we set out. From 'the establishment of the Christian religion' it is an empire as well ecclesiastical as civil, whose history is, in whatever measure a historian chooses, that of a church entwined with the civil power and complicating its exercise with questions of belief and authority. We have reached the starting point of what earlier volumes of *Barbarism and Religion* termed 'the Enlightened narrative'.

It is important to remember that histories of empire and histories of the Church were independent genres not coalesced into a single narrative. The events of the year 69–70 related by Tacitus and the events of the same year related by Josephus took place in distinct historical universes, and even Howel's *History of the World* – studied by Gibbon as a schoolboy – had not brought church and empire together, though it had tried harder than most.[3] In chapter 14 Gibbon related the wars of the tetrarchs without mentioning the alternating persecution and toleration of the Christians, even though Lactantius's *De Mortibus Persecutorum* was one of his sources; in chapter 16 we shall find him obliged to narrate them again, this time as ecclesiastical history with persecution as a central issue. Sacred and ecclesiastical history can never be sidelined, and is about to take charge of Gibbon's narrative, even if we think the narrative written in order to demolish belief in it. This possibility must be faced, but cannot be explored until we know what narrative Gibbon is supplying. This in turn we cannot know until we know

[2] Womersley, 1994, I, p. 445; FDF, pp. 494–6. [3] EEG, pp. 28–40.

how he goes about injecting a history of the Christian Church into the narrative of the *Decline and Fall*, and for this we must know what history he had read and was using.

To speak of 'the establishment of the Christian religion' as an 'immediate' consequence of the victory of Constantine might, though it need not, lead a reader in 1776 to expect that Gibbon would proceed directly to relate Constantine's actions constituting that establishment, and to consider their consequences. It is counterfactually important to imagine what might have happened had he done so. For hundreds of years before his time, imperialists and papalists in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Protestants and Catholics in the sixteenth and seventeenth – to say nothing of philological critics such as Lorenzo Valla in the *quattrocento* – had debated the consequences of Constantine's 'establishment', some praising him for grounding empire upon church, some for subjecting the priesthood to the empire, some blaming him for granting them too much power. Gibbon could have gone on from chapter 14 to relate Constantine's actions and pronounce judgement on them, and what he said would have been controversial but predictable, and need not have been scandalous. He did just this in chapters 20 and 21, by which time his fiercest critics (all but one of them Protestants) were as we shall see affirming that if only he had withheld his strictures on the Christian clergy until the age after Constantine, he would have said nothing objectionable, since the drift towards priestcraft and papacy had by then begun. It is a central fact in the writing, the publication and the reception of the *Decline and Fall* that Gibbon did not proceed direct to 'the immediate and memorable consequences' of Constantine's seizure of power, but instead chose to conclude his volume of 1776 with two chapters on the history of the Church before Constantine, with which the present volume is mainly concerned. The period in ecclesiastical history of which he chose to write – though without stating clearly where in Christian chronology his focus lay – was the age of the Fathers, occupying the interval between that of the Apostles and that of Constantine and the Councils. It is important to understand that criticisms of the formation of authority in this period could be read as retroactive, reflecting discredit on the Apostles and even the Gospels. The history Gibbon supplied or implied in chapters 15 and 16 was therefore scandalous, as he knew and at some level intended it would be, and many attacks on these chapters were written, both before and after his second volume appeared. It is also of the first importance in the history of Gibbon's work that he did not arrive at the 'immediate and memorable consequences' of

1776 until 1781, by which time his reputation as an unbeliever, who wrote the history of Christianity in order to undermine it as a faith, was irreversibly established. He had allowed this image five years in which to take shape before proceeding with the history of which chapter 14 is the prelude and chapters 15 and 16 a preface and postponement. Had he not written these – as perhaps he was not obliged to do – or (another counterfactual) had he reserved them as an introduction to his second volume,[4] our image of him at the present day would have been other than it is. The portrait of Gibbon as irreligious scoffer, formed and condemned by his Christian and clerical readers in 1776–81, has been upheld and applauded by his Enlightened and agnostic readers from that day to this. It may well be correct; but how far does it describe his intentions or his performance?

The purpose of the present enquiry is not so much to challenge this portrait – though we must proceed to discover just what he wrote in the two chapters and just what it means and meant – as to examine the place of these chapters in the intention and reception of the *Decline and Fall*. We know that they were written during something of a hiatus or delay in Gibbon's completion of his first volume. In addition to what the conclusion of chapter 14 has to tell us, Gibbon wrote twice to his friend John Holroyd, later Lord Sheffield, on 20 July and 1 August 1775 – the *Decline and Fall* was first published in February 1776 – telling him (as Gibbon's letters rarely do) of the progress of his work. In the earlier letter he says:

> from a natural impatience as you well know I have begun to print the head before the tail was quite finished, some parts must be composed, and as I proceed in the reviewing so many emendations and alterations occur,

and on 1 August:

> As to the tail it is perfectly formed and digested (and were I so much given to self content and haste) it is almost all written. The ecclesiastical part for instance is written out in fourteen sheet, which I mean to refondre from beginning to end.[5]

These letters challenge our knowledge of eighteenth-century authorial practice;[6] what for instance is the meaning of 'sheet(s)' where handwriting is

[4] I must thank the participants in the Sussex workshop mentioned in 'Acknowledgements' for this suggestion.

[5] *Letters*, II, pp. 80–1. Did he mean to write 'were I not'?

[6] I am indebted to Richard Sher for correspondence on this subject. Gibbon says (A, p. 334) that he used to send his 'first rough manuscript' to the printer, and revise (apparently also to rewrite) it with the proofs before him. This may be why no manuscripts of the *Decline and Fall* have survived. See also A, p. 202n., for a note by Milman on Gibbon's writing practices, based on information supplied by J. B. Suard.

concerned? 'Refondre' is also less than clear, but seems to support Gibbon's recollection in his memoirs that

> the fifteenth and sixteenth Chapters have been reduced, by three successive revisals, from a large Volume to their present size, and they might still be compressed without any loss of facts or sentiments.[7]

The two chapters were surely never intended to form a separate bound volume of the *Decline and Fall*; but it seems clear that Gibbon was working to revise and reduce them at least six months before the first edition of his first volume appeared. Are we to suppose that they were written under pressure self-imposed or otherwise? We have a contemporary witness who thought that they, or parts of them, fitted badly into what Gibbon was writing. On 3 April 1776, Hugh Blair in Edinburgh wrote to his friend Adam Smith (who was a friend of Gibbon) to congratulate him on the publication of the *Wealth of Nations*. Having done so he continued:

> This has been a fortunate season. Gibbon has given us an Elegant and Masterly Book. But what the Deuce had he to do with Attacking Religion? It will both Clog his Work, and it is itself Unhistorical and out of place. I heartily wish him to go on; but for God's sake let him for the future keep off that ground as much as possible.[8]

Here we have the first judgement that Gibbon was 'attacking Religion', in some sense so broad, and evident to its author, as to be unspecified. It comes, not from some angry and ambitious clergyman of the Church of England – as do several attacks on Gibbon's first volume – but from a leading member of the Moderate party who have become almost synonymous with 'the Scottish Enlightenment'. We shall need to consider what this and other responses may have meant. But Blair, a specialist in rhetoric and an acute critic, is of the opinion that to 'attack religion', whatever that meant – his language does not suggest that Gibbon has gravely shocked him – formed no part of the history Gibbon was writing and impeded its development. Did he think Gibbon's historical purposes were 'clogged' by the two chapters as a whole – there is reason to ask what was their part in winding up the first volume – or only by those parts he thought were 'attacking religion'? We may never know; but Blair's words impel us to discover both what made him and others think Gibbon was attacking religion, and separately, what if any historical purposes he thought, or we may think, were being carried out in chapters 15 and 16, or by the *Decline and Fall* as it began taking shape.

[7] A, p. 308 (Memoir E). [8] Mossner and Ross, 1987, p. 189.

(iii) gibbon and the orthodox history

Whatever Hugh Blair had in mind, there is a series of Gibbon interpretations, running back to his first critics, from which we can tell with some certainty what words there were in the *Decline and Fall* that made his readers believe that he was 'attacking religion'. They occur in the third paragraph of chapter 15 and introduce it.

> Our curiosity is naturally prompted to inquire by what means the Christian religion obtained so remarkable a victory over the established religions of the earth. To this inquiry, an obvious but satisfactory answer may be returned; that it was owing to the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself, and to the ruling providence of its great Author. But as truth and reason seldom find so favourable a reception in the world, and as the wisdom of Providence frequently condescends to use the passions of the human heart, and the general circumstances of mankind, as instruments to execute its purpose; we may still be permitted, though with becoming submission, to ask, not indeed what were the first, but what were the secondary causes of the rapid growth of the Christian Church. It will, perhaps, appear, that it was most effectively favoured and assisted by the five following causes:[9]

which Gibbon proceeds to enumerate and develop in the chapter which follows. Chapter 16 is a study of persecution and, like its predecessor, of the impact of Christianity on Roman culture. But the five causes failed to satisfy his Christian readers, and indeed convinced them that he meant to attack religion by introducing them. Such readers were not seeking to satisfy their 'curiosity' – to them not a virtue but a possibly pagan vice – but to sustain conviction. To them the truth of the Christian revelation was not merely 'obvious', 'satisfactory' and 'convincing', but a living force, a divine word that had been and to some still was incarnate in the world and had made its way in history through its inherent and continuously revealed power. They expected to be told, and to be edified by being told, that their religion had been spread, not merely by the 'evidence' for it, but by itself and its power over the human spirit (a term for which the Enlightened use of *l'esprit humain* was not an equivalent but a substitution). They also wished to assign a special role to 'Providence', a divine power operating when direct inspiration had ceased. They thought that Gibbon was not acknowledging but implicitly denying the spiritual history of the Word, and they suspected that his five secondary causes offered as many secular processes intelligible to the historian, which he intended to substitute for it. Whether this is what he was doing in chapter 15 is a question deferred

[9] Womersley, 1994, I, p. 447.

until that chapter is analysed; but we can already see that his critics were offended less by what he said than by what he did not say, and by the tone and sentence structure of the passages in which he omitted saying it. There is a story to be told in which Gibbon's tone and style come to be seen as the main vehicle of his 'attack on religion', and the main evidence for it.

This is a history of reception as well as of intentions, and we need to situate the latter in the context provided by the former. As recent scholarship has made clear, Gibbon knew that he was about to give offence, and between the first and second editions of volume I made emendations intended to refine the ways in which he would do so.[10] But in order to understand the reception he received, and indeed what he wrote in the offending chapters, we need to go in sufficient depth into what was in his and his readers' minds; and it is a question whether the simple opposition between sacred and secular history is enough to account for the texts before us. The context is one of sacred and ecclesiastical history. In the chapters to follow, we shall explore in some detail – following the practice of these volumes – the major texts of history to which Gibbon made reference; but by way of introduction, it is necessary to make an initial statement of the ways in which canonical Christianity took the form of a history, to which ecclesiastical historians contributed, and which was being radically affected by changes in ecclesiastical historiography, as something in the nature of a Protestant Enlightenment took shape in the century preceding the *Decline and Fall*.[11] Gibbon's reading, and arguably his thinking, were shaped by texts belonging to the first half of that century.

There was a history, catholic, orthodox and up to a rather early point canonical, in which a divine being identified as the Son of God had appeared in Roman-controlled Judea at the time when Augustus and Tiberius were establishing the principate. He had appeared in fulfilment of the prophecies uttered at and before the time of the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, but as he offered universal redemption rather than national liberation, the Jews of the Second Temple had failed to recognise him as the prophesied Messiah, and had incurred expulsion from sacred and secular history by putting him unjustly to death – a measure taken by Roman authorities at Jewish instigation. During his life on earth he had worked miracles as a sign of his divine authority, in addition to preaching a morality which was part of his offer of redemption. After his crucifixion he rose from the dead – an act far beyond a miracle, since it offered all men

[10] Womersley, 2002, ch. I, pp. 13–42.
[11] For a proposal concerning the nature of this Enlightenment, see Pocock, 2008.

the resurrection of the body – and ascended to heaven, leaving his Apostles to form a church charged with continuing his mission and in some sense his presence. Ecclesiastical history could be said to begin either from that moment, or from his earlier gathering of the disciples about him and his charge to them.

On the day of Pentecost the Apostles had been endowed by God's Spirit with powers miraculous in the broad sense that they were more than natural, and in the specific sense that they included the authority to work signs and wonders displaying their divine mission. A special revelation had increased their number by the addition of Paul, an Apostle unlike them in being versed in Greek as well as Jewish learning, under whose leadership, and Peter's, the apostolic mission had been extended to the Gentiles: primarily Greeks as recorded in the Acts and Epistles, but also Latins if one followed (as Protestants did not) the tradition that Peter had moved to Rome, where he exercised a supremacy given him by Christ in person. The literature later recognised as canonical broke off at the moment when Paul undertook a journey to Rome, where tradition but not canon said he met with Peter and both suffered death in a persecution under Nero.

By steps which seem to have been of limited concern to Gibbon, the canon forming the New Testament came to consist of the Four Gospels,[12] the truncated and perhaps misnamed Acts of the Apostles, a number of epistles mostly attributed to Paul, and in a class of its own – to which alone Gibbon pays attention in what he has to say about the formation of the canon – the Apocalypse or Revelation. It is of central importance to the history of ecclesiastical history that these do not form a canonical narrative of the apostolic period as a whole, so that the history of the Church had to be composed from evidence part of which stood in need of construction and interpretation. Marginal to the canonical narrative of Christ's words, actions and sufferings, contained in the four recognised Gospels, there began to appear statements as to his nature, in which he was not only the Son of God but his incarnate Word, in a sense uttered by the Apostles and after them. These statements were to be found in certain of the Epistles of Paul and even more crucially in the opening words of the Fourth Gospel, said to have been composed by the Apostle John at Ephesus years later. They therefore appear late in the narrative of Christian history both sacred and ecclesiastical, and it comes to be a question how far the canon presents these statements of Christ's nature as the redemptive Word revealed in him

[12] I give this word an initial capital where the four canonical books are intended, using the lower case to refer to the message of Christ in general.

to his disciples and preached by them as Apostles constituting the original Church. If the Church[13] was indeed the Word in action, there must next arise the question of how, and with what authority, the Apostles conveyed its preaching to those who came after them. It was here, however, that the Word preached was identified with the Word incarnate, and by its own divine power overcame the Jewish and Greek discourse to which it seemed merely 'the foolishness of the Word'.

There is, however, an antecedent question, which associates the history of the Word with another, both alien and intimately connected. The Mission to the Gentiles opens a history in which the language of the Christian mission comes to be Greek, even the Gospels being written in a dialect of that tongue, and there arises the question of what language or languages were spoken by Christ and the Apostles during his life on earth. Greek is the language of philosophy, and there arises the further assumption that the Word encountered philosophy from the first moments of the Mission to the Gentiles. From this encounter there are dated, from the time of Paul himself, the advent of heresies, meaning statements about Christ incompatible (or said to be so) with his divinity as redeemer, made by Greek, Greco-Iranian and Greco-Egyptian philosophy in response to the Word it misunderstands. A history of Jewish thought, especially the Platonic philosophy of Philo, is woven into this narrative, and there will come to be a Christian history of philosophy aimed at showing how it arose and why it initially and perhaps lastingly misunderstood the Word. This, however, is incidental to a history, both sacred and ecclesiastical, that comes to be increasingly a history of how the true and orthodox Word overcame its heretical misstatements. This history begins in the canon itself: Paul at Corinth encounters a false *gnōsis*, and John at Ephesus composes the Fourth Gospel in reply to the Judeo-gnostic heresy of Cerinthus. Christian history becomes that of a cultural encounter, and it can be asked whether John's doctrine of the Word made Flesh is not itself Platonic.

With the death of the last Apostle – traditionally John – authority passes to those known as the Fathers of the Church: first the Apostolic Fathers, who had known the Apostles themselves, and then those succeeding them, until Constantine establishes a religion of state and presides at the first of the general councils (to which assemblies the term 'Fathers' will henceforth be confined). For historians wishing to treat the apostolic period as if it were canonical – which it was only in part – the age of the Fathers (c. AD 100–300) initiates that mentioned by Gibbon as that of 'the uninspired teachers

[13] See previous note. The initial capital denotes specificity, the lower case conceptual abstraction.

of the gospel', known to have been fallible but guided by Providence. What degree of authority belonged to the Fathers? To give them too much was, for Protestants, to fall into the popish error of the continuously infallible church; to deny it altogether might be to deny the Christian religion any history but one contingent, secular and human, and where would Christ be in that? Of the post-Apostolic Fathers the names that stood out were those of Justin Martyr and Irenaeus; the former because he had given a classic account of how the Platonic philosophy might become Christian – though he had cast it in the form of a dialogue with Platonising Jews and had said less about Christ as the Word made Flesh than as the Messiah foretold by the prophets of the Exile; the latter because he had given an account – almost too detailed to be credible – of the principal gnostic sects, and also one of John composing the Fourth Gospel to vindicate the equality of Creator and Redeemer against them. Both Fathers explicated and continued the involvement of the gospel with the Platonising philosophy it transcended, and were figures of controversy in later debate for their testimony to the continued performance of miracles, and for their willingness to employ allegory and typology in relating Jewish prophecy, Greek philosophy and Christian revelation to one another. These themes became dominant in both the narrative and the exegesis of ecclesiastical history; but there were others, most notably the history of the persecutions and the army of martyrs. Ecclesiastical history was never monothematic, if only for the reason that it was post-canonical; the historians assembled from tradition and information the subjects of which it was to consist.

(iv) signposts to a protestant enlightenment

The post-Constantinian and post-Nicene history of the Church thus displayed a Christ who, after performing miracles to proclaim his divinity, had offered himself to redeem sinners and left behind him a church which by speaking his Word had continued his presence. The Word had been articulated in the Gospels, by Apostles who were unlearned men and had in the first instance transmitted it orally; when and how it had been reduced to writing was a further question. The Gospels had proclaimed him Redeemer, and this message – paradoxically described as 'the foolishness of the Word' – had challenged both Jewish prophetic exegesis and (in the Mission to the Gentiles) Greek philosophy. From both, and especially the latter, false doctrines concerning Christ and his nature had almost immediately arisen, and the Apostles, charged with miraculous powers as preachers of the Word, had been obliged to construct written statements concerning

the truth about him. The Gospel had encountered philosophy – its first contextualisation – and had needed restatement in philosophic language. After the Apostles there had appeared the Fathers, who had continued to utter the Word in a climate of philosophy and persecution. They had achieved a reconciliation of Christ and philosophy – predominantly Platonist – but after Constantine had ended persecution, there had arisen a major debate, philosophical in origin, between heresy and orthodoxy within the Church, which had been confronted and resolved at the Council of Nicaea. Christ's nature had been established as the equal of his Father's, and the incarnate Word had henceforth been conveyed in theological form.

To return to the moment at which Gibbon published his two chapters, we must trace both the modification and the retention of this orthodox narrative that occurred as Protestant thinking mutated into Enlightenment – meaning by the latter term a state of mind in which critical enquiry came to precede and even replace belief. It was a resistance to 'the foolishness of the Word' far more stubborn and subversive than any with which Jews and Greeks had confronted St Paul; yet belief persisted and in some ways formed part of it. Protestants had no monopoly of Enlightenment in this sense, and the routes to be traced are only some of those by which Enlightenments occurred; they are, however, those necessary to the context in which Gibbon wrote and was read. In brief summary: from the sixteenth century on, Catholics insisted that the Church was a transhistorical body, conveying a Word truly stated by the Councils and the Fathers who linked them with the Apostles and Gospels, and doing so by an authority which had not changed since Christ's charge to Peter. For Protestants – about whom any statement must be selective and simplified – the Church was a body of men and women constantly returning to Scripture in search of the grace and authority that could be found only there and by faith alone. Such an enterprise must be pursued as much in secular as in sacred time, and there was a history or anti-history of the Church which recounted the usurpation of authority by the popes. It was an important move in the direction of Enlightenment when some Protestants abandoned the claim that this had been the work of a malignant spiritual power named Antichrist, and presented the pope as no more than a patriarch, who had been led to claim authority over his fellows by the accidents of secular history.[14]

This step had been taken as a result of debate among Protestants as to the meanings of clergy and priesthood. The doctrine of recourse to Scripture did not mean to every Protestant that all believers were equally priests;

[14] Trevor-Roper, 1968, 1987, 1992; EEG, p. 8.

there might be truths which only some were equipped to propound, and the understanding of Scripture might be accorded by grace or by learning only to a few. To turn to Scripture, furthermore, was to return to the Apostles who had written and taught it, and it was a question whether or not they had possessed a homiletic or exegetical authority which they had transmitted to others. At this point the situation was complicated by the intervention of humanist scholarship. Erasmus and others – operating independently of Luther, at a moment Gibbon came to think the beginning of rational theology[15] – had examined the texts of Scripture, and found them to be imperfect human artefacts, presenting problems in orthography and translation from one language to another. One of these in particular – the Greek of the New Testament – had proved to be historically specific, a dialect neither Attic nor Homeric, filled with Hebraisms and unclassical turns of speech. It is important not to proceed so directly to the destructive consequences that could follow from this as to forget that philological criticism, the *ars historica* and the *ars critica*, became available to all in the ongoing debate over the transmission of authority and the present role of the clergy.

This became a debate on ecclesiastical history itself. Did it relate the transmission of authority or subvert it as usurpation? Was secular history – growing ever more detailed under the impact of philological humanism – a record of works unredeemed by grace, a record of works reinforcing the actions of grace, or a record of secular actions to which divine grace was altogether irrelevant? In a chapter of *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon*[16] it was considered how an 'Arminian Enlightenment', challenging the Calvinist absolute decrees of grace, might both diminish the role of the clergy and enhance that of history in the making of the Church – with paradoxical results in the case of England – and it further appeared, however marginally, that to diminish the role of grace might be to diminish the full divinity of Jesus Christ. Wherever there was reaction against the devastating effects of religious war upon civil society, there was an impulse to show that the Gospels contained nothing incompatible with the rule of the magistrate; but if Christ had added nothing to the reign of law (which would have to be Roman and natural rather than Jewish and ceremonial) what need was there to suppose him the equal of his Father? Thomas Hobbes and James Harrington arrived at this point from standpoints opposite but equally political.[17]

[15] DF, v, ch. 54, n. 38; Womersley, 1994, III, p. 438.
[16] EEG, ch. 2, pp. 50–71.
[17] Pocock, 1977, pp. 77–82.

Gibbon possessed an eighteenth-century edition of the works of Hobbes, but seems nowhere to have mentioned or alluded to him.[18] Nevertheless he may be brought into the narrative at this point, as illustrating by carrying to extremes the repudiation of ecclesiastical and sacred history, and the substitution of another, that mark what we will term Enlightenment in Protestant cultures. His anger is levelled at the debate between Arian and Athanasian views of Christ's divinity, which obliged Constantine to call the Council of Nicaea; he does not quite know whether to praise the emperor for controlling the debate or to condemn him for taking part in it. Like others before and after him, Hobbes might be expected to prefer the lower to the higher view of Christ's person and therefore the clergy's authority; but he condemns the entire debate, as rooted in the false philosophy of essences and substances which is the Greek intellect's damnable legacy to European culture. The gospel collided with philosophy, the work of a parasitic class of necromancers and logomancers infesting ancient culture;[19] it is of course evident that the philosophers became priests, using later Platonism and medieval Aristotelianism as their instruments of mystification. By what philosophy ancient error is to be replaced, and what if anything this will have to say about Christ, are of course further questions.[20]

Hobbes had produced a counter-narrative, in which the Mission to the Gentiles played a tragic role; not because Jewish understanding of Christ was in any way to be preferred, but because Greek culture entangled the gospel in a theology as unmeaning as the metaphysics it was founded on. He thus swept aside the long tradition of Christian learning which recounted, first, the distance between Platonic philosophy and revealed truth, and second, the steps by which that distance had been bridged. It was this reconciliation which he considered the origin of priestcraft and theology. Hobbes of course desired to replace Platonic philosophy with a materialism his contemporaries could not distinguish from atheism, but at the same time he was able to speak of the Gospels as possessing a simple and original meaning known to the Apostles and perhaps to some of the

[18] *Library*, p. 150. The name of Hobbes does not occur in the Bibliographical Index to Womersley's third volume (1994).

[19] See, most recently and fully, Hobbes, 2008.

[20] See his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, lines 69–72 (Hobbes, 2008, pp. 354–5):

> Tempore namque illo, quo nostrae Praeco salutis
> In Graecis sparsit semina Paulus agris,
> Maxima erat mundo falsorum philosophorum
> Copia: nequitiae Plemmyris illa fuit.

Fathers, but by others distorted into meaningless speech.[21] This originally simple gospel was to appear many times in the subsequent literature, as the restored Church of England emphasised its conformity to normal authority, but its exact meaning is often less than clear. On the one hand, it could mean that Christ had taught no more than a reinforcement of morals by the promise (or threat) of immortality, rewards and punishments; an argument always strong, but tending at this period towards another reduction of his divinity. On the other, it could mean that he had promised redemption and forgiveness to all who had faith in him, and that this faith did not require any intellectual formulation of his nature, which might lie beyond all human understanding. There was a Christian Enlightenment that could lead towards unitarianism, evangelism or both together, but at the same time resisted taking these steps too far.[22]

Hobbes had written under the impact of an English civil war in which Roman, Laudian and Presbyterian clergy could all be blamed as having claimed a spiritual authority at the expense of a civil. The next phase of anti-theological yet sometimes pietist Enlightenment came at a time when England was involved in a European crisis less drastic but more complex than the War of the Three Kingdoms: one springing from the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, the crisis of the English monarchy under James II, and the European war of 1688–97. It was argued in an earlier volume that publicists and princes were anxious to ensure that this general crisis should not develop – as in some regions it did – into another war of religion, and that this helps account for the journalistic enterprises in which Pierre Bayle and other Huguenot exiles formulated a strategy of sceptical toleration.[23] There took shape a widespread debate over toleration,[24] in studying which it is important to keep in mind, first, that though those taking part were deeply concerned for the liberty of the believing conscience, the outcome of their arguments was often to liberate the sovereign from the obligation to persecute his subjects at the demand of the clergy; second, that though many of those taking part were deeply sincere believers, it is very difficult for two confessions to tolerate one another without both being situated in a context not confessionally determined, in which their beliefs will be relativised and personalised as the product of secular circumstance. Toleration exacts a price of secularisation and politicisation, and there are

[21] Hobbes, 2008, pp. 308–9. Their meaning is reinforced by the certain knowledge of Christ's miracles, pp. 382–3.

[22] Pocock, 1985b, 2008, 2009.

[23] EEG, pp. 58–64.

[24] Zagorin, 2003; Marshall, 2006. For the view that toleration might rest less on the rights of the individual than on those of the sovereign, see most recently Hunter, 2007.

cases in which it has been intended as a means to those ends. The Christ perceived by tolerant minds might not be the Christ of Nicaea or the Fourth Gospel.

These debates came at a time when the harsh world of Hobbes and Locke, in which the individual might be obliged to take up arms by the dissolution of government, was giving way to one in which the fiscal-military state lessened the threat of civil war and led him to rely less on Leviathan than on a state formed by polite manners and civil society.[25] In such a world, churches might consider what price they had paid for escaping the charge that they threatened the authority of state and society. Were they to be simply that aspect of society that attended to its relations with God? Or were they to be the vehicle of the supernatural virtues, and beyond them the faith in Christ, that redeemed humans from their sins? At an early phase in the processes we know as Enlightenment, it was necessary to decide whether humans were social animals or something more. There were strong moral and political pressures tending to make Christ more a reconciler than a redeemer, the bearer of peace rather than of a sword. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, made his appearance, at some distance from him who should come to judge the quick and the dead, and offering less of a challenge to the civil magistrate and civil manners. Such changes, however, tended to reduce his divinity, and to reopen the door to all the debates over his nature that had marked the patristic and conciliar periods. Beyond the point at which he might be emptied of divinity lay the spectres of deism, atheism and pantheism;[26] but more immediate than any of these, about the year 1700, was the perceived danger called Socinianism. Fausto and Lelio Sozzini had contended for a doctrine of redemption based more on what Christ had said than on what he was; there had followed a unitarianism in which he appeared a messenger, a being divine in mission but not in substance. As we follow the literature of debate, however, 'Socinianism' seems increasingly to denote a willingness to hold the question of his nature open to discussion, almost as if it could never be finally decided. Here we encounter a scepticism potentially fideist; is the question nonsensical, or is the answer greater than we can grasp? We also encounter the positivist Enlightenment of method, more drastic than even the radical; there is nothing to think about but our own thoughts. If these are social phenomena, the sciences of society will illuminate them.

[25] Pocock, 1996; 2005, ch. 8.

[26] For differing views of the separation between 'Moderate' and 'Radical' Enlightenment, see Jacob, 1981, and Israel, 2001.

In Protestant, and peculiarly in English thought – the great ecclesiastical historians were not English, but the Church of England remained the most Catholic of the Protestant confessions – there was intense debate, throughout the eighteenth century, over how far Nicene theology remained apostolic and how far it might be reduced to a historical narrative. The critical enterprise supported the latter thesis. This entailed a retelling of Christian history before and after Constantine, in which some attacked, while others defended, the second-century Fathers for their Platonism, their belief in miracles and even their use of language. But was it possible to deny that they had continued the mission of the Apostles without nullifying that mission and with it the Gospel narratives, the miracles of Christ himself and even his presence as the incarnate Word? A study of ecclesiastical history in this period will help us to see how Gibbon's fifteenth chapter appeared in its context, and why it was found disturbing; but it will also show Gibbon departing from this history to pursue themes of his own. We shall return to Hugh Blair's judgement and the question it raises: was Gibbon, or was he not, wandering from his business as a historian?

PART I

Gibbon's orthodox sources

In the beginning was the Word.
John i, 1

CHAPTER I

The Christian ancients: Eusebius and the Fathers

(1)

The purpose of the next five chapters is to enquire into the narratives of Christian history in the era before Constantine which were available to Gibbon and offer a context for the narrative of his fifteenth and sixteenth chapters. We turn initially to his ancient sources, written before or soon after Constantine's accession and 'the establishment of the Christian religion', and we necessarily begin with the *Ecclesiastical History* by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, considered the founder of this branch of historiography – though he made use of historical statements written before his time – because he was obliged to determine and expound the lines on which such a history must proceed. The *Ecclesiastical History*, written between 311 and 324,[1] runs from the Ascension of Jesus Christ to the accession of Constantine; in civil history it is linked with Eusebius's life of Constantine, in sacred history with his *Praeparatio Evangelica* and *Demonstratio Evangelica*, which situate Christ in the actions performed by God in, or upon, human time. Eusebius here is less a source for the events, secular or sacred, of Constantine's reign than a shaper of the earlier narrative with which Gibbon necessarily interacted in writing the two chapters that conclude his volume of 1776; in particular the fifteenth, which dealt with the spread of Christianity. Gibbon attacked Eusebius's reliability and even veracity when writing of the persecutions and martyrdoms, but this issue does not yet concern us.

It was a central problem for Eusebius constructing the *Ecclesiastical History* that the canonical narrative broke off at Paul's journey to Rome, so that he was obliged to make decisions as to the narrative to be recounted from that time onwards. In his opening chapter he tells of several contexts

[1] Lake, 1926, pp. xix–xxiii; more generally, Momigliano, 1977, pp. 107–19; Barnes, 1981; Chestnut, 1986.

in which the history of the Church is to be recounted, and concludes by acknowledging the fragmentary nature of his sources:

οὐδ' ἄλλοθεν ἢ ἀπὸ πρώτης ἄρξομαι τῆς κατὰ τὸν σωτῆρα καὶ κύριον ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦν τὸν Χριστον τοῦ θεοῦ οἰκονομίας. ἀλλά μοι συγγνώμην εὐγνωμόνων ἐντεῦθεν ὁ λόγος αἰτεῖ, μείζονα ἢ καθ' ἡμετέραν δύναμιν ὁμολογῶν εἶναι τὴν ἐπαγγελίαν ἐντελῆ καὶ ἀπαράλειπτον ὑποσχεῖν, ἐπεὶ καὶ πρῶτοι νῦν τῆς ὑποθέσεως ἐπιβάντες ὀΐά τινα ἐρήμην καὶ ἀτριβῆ ἰέναι ὁδὸν ἐγχειροῦμεν, θεὸν μὲν ὁδηγὸν καὶ τὴν τοῦ κυρίου συνεργὸν σχήσειν εὐχόμενοι δύναμιν, ἀνθρώπων γε μὴν οὐδαμῶς εὑρεῖν οἷοί τε ὄντες ἴχνη γυμνὰ τὴν αὐτὴν ἡμῖν προωδευκότων, μὴ ὅτι σμικρὰς οὐτὸ μόνον προφάσεις, δι' ὧν ἄλλος ἀλλως ὧν διηνύκασι χρόνων μερικὰς ἡμῖν καταλελοίπασι διηγήσεις, πόρρωθεν ὥσπερ εἰ πυρσοὺς τὰς ἑαυτῶν προανατείνοντες φωνὰς καὶ ἄνωθέν ποθεν ὡς ἐξ ἀπόπτου καὶ ἀπὸ σκοπῆς βοῶντες καὶ διακελευόμενοι, ᾗ χρὴ βαδίζειν καὶ τὴν τοῦ λόγου πορείαν ἁπλανῶς καὶ ἀκινδύνως εὐθύνειν. ὅσα τοίνυν εἰς τὴν προκειμένην ὑπόθεσιν λυσιτελεῖν ἡγούμεθα τῶν αὐτοῖς ἐκείνοις σποράδην μνημονευθέντων, ἀναλεξάμενοι καὶ ὡς ἂν ἐκ λογικῶν λειμώνων τὰς ἐπιτηδείους αὐτῶν τῶν πάλαι συγγραφέων ἀπανθισάμενοι φωνάς, δι' ὑφηγήσεως ἱστορικῆς πειρασόμεθα σωματοποιῆσαι, ἀγαπῶντες, εἰ καὶ μὴ ἁπάντων, τῶν δ' οὖν μάλιστα διαφανεστάτων τοῦ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν ἀποστόλων τὰς διαδοχὰς κατὰ τὰς διαπρεπούσας ἔτι καὶ νῦν μνημονευομένας ἐκκλησίας ἀνασωσαίμεθα.[2]

[My starting point is therefore no other than the first dispensation of God touching our Saviour and Lord, Jesus the Christ. Even at that point the project at once demands the lenience of the kindly, for confessedly it is beyond our power to fulfil the promise, complete and perfect, since we are the first to enter on the undertaking, as travellers on some desolate and untrodden way. We pray God to give us his guidance, and that we may have the help of the power of the Lord, for nowhere can we find even the bare footsteps of men who have preceded us in the same path, unless it be those slight indications by which in diverse ways they have left to us partial accounts of the times through which they have passed, raising their voices as a man holds up a torch from afar, calling to us from on high as from a distant watch-tower, and telling us how we must walk, and how to guide the course of our work without error or danger. We have therefore collected from their scattered memoirs all that we think will be useful for the present subject, and have brought together the utterances of the ancient writers themselves that are appropriate to it, culling, as it were, the flowers of the intellectual fields. We shall endeavour to give them unity by historical treatment, rejoicing to rescue the successions, if not of all, at least of the most distinguished of the apostles of our Saviour throughout those churches of which the fame is still remembered.][3]

Gibbon alludes to 'the scanty and suspicious materials' that obscure even the 'first' – presumably the post-canonical but apostolic – 'age of the

[2] Lake, 1926, p. 8. [3] Ibid., p. 9.

church'.[4] Whatever may have been his intentions, Eusebius is saying that the history of the Church is fragmentary as soon as it is not canonical. His task is to collect and present a history post-canonical, but not quite the same as post-apostolic, since he is far from having all the acts of the Twelve; and we may now consider how he presents his organisation of that history.

Τὰς τῶν ἱερῶν ἀποστόλων διαδοχὰς σὺν καὶ τοῖς ἀπὸ τοῦ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν καὶ εἰς ἡμᾶς διηνυσμένοις χρόνοις, ὅσα τε καὶ πηλίκα πραλματευθῆναι κατὰ τὴν ἐκκλησιαστικὴν ἱστορίαν λέγεται, καὶ ὅσοι ταύτης διαπρεπῶς ἐν ταῖς μάλιστα ἐπισημοτάταις παροικίαις ἡγήσαντό τε καὶ προέστησαν, ὅσοι τε κατὰ γενεὰν ἑκάστην ἀγράφως ἢ καὶ διὰ συγγραμμάτων τὸν θεῖον ἐπρέσβευσαν λόγον, τίνες τε καὶ ὅσοι καὶ ὁπηνίκα νεωτεροποιίας ἱμέρω πλάνης εἰς ἔσχατον ἐλάσαντες, ψευδωνύμου γνώσεως εἰσηγητὰς ἑαυτοὺς ἀνακεκηρύχασιν, ἀφειδῶς οἷα λύκοι βαρεῖς τὴν Χριστοῦ ποίμνην ἐπεντρίβοντες, πρὸς ἐπὶ τούτοις καὶ τὰ παραυτίκα τῆς κατὰ τοῦ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν ἐπιβουλῆς το παν Ἰουδαίων ἔθνος περιελθόντα, ὅσα τε αὖ καὶ ὁποῖα καθ' οἵους τε χρόνους πρὸς τῶν ἐθνῶν ὁ θεῖος πεπολέμηται λόγος, καὶ πηλίκοι κατὰ καιροὺς τὸν δι' αἵματος καὶ βασάνων ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦν διενῆλθον ἀγῶνα, τά τ' ἐπι τούτοις καὶ καθ' ἡμᾶς αὐτοὺς μαρτύρια καὶ τὴν ἐπὶ πάσιν ἵλεω καὶ εὐμενῆ τοῦ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν ἀντίληψιν γραφῆ παραδοῦναι προηρημένος.

[I have purposed to record in writing the successions of the sacred apostles, covering the period stretching from our Saviour to ourselves; the number and character of the transactions recorded in the history of the Church; the number of those who were distinguished in her government and leadership in the provinces of greatest fame; the number of those who in each generation were the ambassadors of the word of God either by speech or pen; the names, the number and the age of those who, driven by the desire of innovation to an extremity of error, have heralded themselves as the introducers of Knowledge, falsely so-called, ravaging the flock of Christ unsparingly, like grim wolves. To this I will add the fate which has beset the whole nation of the Jews from the moment of their plot against our Saviour; moreover, the number and nature and times of the wars waged by the heathen against the divine word and the character of those who, for its sake, passed from time to time through the contest of blood and torture; furthermore the martyrdoms of our own time, and the gracious and favouring help of our Saviour in them all.][5]

Eusebius has been obliged to define ecclesiastical history by setting out a number of contexts in which the history of the Church proceeds: the continuity of office holders; the rise of heresies, already associated with a false *gnōsis*; the downfall of the Jews; the persecutions and the martyrdoms. These constitute an ecclesiastical more than a sacred history, though the latter comes into view as the continuity of Christ and his

[4] Womersley, 1994, I, p. 446. [5] Lake, 1926, pp. 7, 9. 'Knowledge' translates the Greek *gnōsis*.

mission, associated, as we shall see, in particular ways with the first and last of these four contexts. The downfall of the Jews, in the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent rebellion of Akiba and Bar Kochba, is also an event in sacred history: the apostasy and punishment of the first Israel and its supersession by the new, which is the Church. There is no Christian history of this catastrophe, and Eusebius must turn to Josephus, a Romanised Jew writing in another historical sequence. But the false *gnōseis*, of which there will be several, introduce a new theme, not much foretold by Jesus or the prophets before him and historically alien to the Old Testament and the Four Gospels: the theme of heresy, in opposition to which orthodoxy is defined, so that the latter becomes a true knowledge as against a false, while at the same time a statement of the Christian life as rising even above knowledge. Here may be said to appear the problem of theology as a central theme in Christian history, of overwhelming importance to Gibbon even as he labours to escape from it.

The structure of the *Ecclesiastical History*, then, is to be a series of narratives, variously connected with sacred history but not forming a canonical history of God's action in the world. Eusebius as historian is responsible for these narratives, but in recounting and authenticating them is in some cases hampered by the very human phenomenon of imperfectly recorded evidence. He is in no doubt, however, that his four narratives take place in a sacred and universal context, and the *History* begins with, and is intended to remain within, the divine nature of Christ as the incarnate Word. This is the Logos of St John's Gospel, which was with God and was God, was made Flesh and dwelt among us. Eusebius is giving what is to become orthodoxy – though his own will be doubted – an irreversibly Johannine cast; he is following Fathers of the second century, in particular Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, who with others are important shapers of his narrative. These opening chapters dwell upon the claim that the Lord who appeared in human form to Abraham, Jacob, Moses and Joshua was God the Son, the Word made visible though not yet incarnate.[6] Since the Word and Person are from eternity, their history cannot begin with the Incarnation, and Eusebius does not here tell the story recounted in the Gospels. His narrated history begins at the moment of Ascension,[7] when Christ departs from the Apostles with the promise that he is always with them. They are (Eusebius does not find it necessary to record) almost immediately visited by the Holy Spirit – not yet, perhaps, recognised as the third person of a Trinity – as a rushing wind and tongues of fire, endowing them with

[6] Eusebius, I, ii, 7–14, in Lake, 1926, pp. 14–19. [7] Eusebius, II, i, in Lake, 1926, pp. 102, 103.

miraculous powers which are both signs and instruments of their office. Eusebius is not in doubt of these powers, but does not emphasise them in the tones used by later authors, faced by the claim that they had ceased or had not existed. He is writing a history of the Church's divine mission, but has other ways of authenticating it.

The canonical narrative of Acts has begun, but will terminate at no very distant point, and the need to establish post-canonical narratives begins to affect the ways in which it is told. Eusebius does not seem to construct a narrative around the conversion of St Paul,[8] an Apostle of another order than the original eleven – they had known Christ on earth, Paul after his Ascension – nor does he make crucial the Council of Jerusalem and the decision to extend the Word to the Gentiles. His history, however, will from an early point situate the Jews in a context formed by other peoples, and then expel them from it. The Apostles and disciples (Stephen the first martyr) are exposed to persecution by the Jews, infuriated by the claim that Jesus was the Messiah but not the messiah they had expected. The Acts continue the story of the Gospels, in which accusations are brought by Jews before Roman magistrates reluctantly compelled to give them effect, and Eusebius is explicit in saying that the Jews as a nation are collectively guilty and collectively punished for their apostasy in refusing Christ.[9] However this originated in the formation of the Christian writings, these did not occasion the Jewish revolt of the late 60s or write Flavius Josephus's history of the Jewish War. Christians massively incorporated the last in their apostolic and post-apostolic histories, and employed its appalling and all too believable narrative of terrorism, suicide, cannibalism and enslavement as proof that a nation formed by covenant could not desert that covenant without disappearing under the most terrible of punishments. The surviving Jews of the Diaspora are known to exist but cease to act as a people in either Christian or Roman history; while Vespasian and Titus act in Josephan and sacred history, leaving their role in Roman history scarcely mentioned.

Josephus, the first 'historian' in the classical sense of the word to appear in the making of Christian history, helps by his *Antiquities* to situate Christ in Jewish history – that of the Herodian dynasty installed by the Romans – and therefore in the history of the Roman empire (*Romaiōn basileia*).[10] His *Jewish War* brings the history of Israel to its apocalyptic close, but until persecution by Romans replaces that by Jews there will be little need to

[8] Eusebius, II, i, 13, in Lake, 1926, pp. 110–11.
[9] Eusebius, II, v, 6, in Lake, 1926, pp. 120–1.
[10] Eusebius, I, ii, 23, in Lake, 1926, pp. 24, 25.

situate Christian history in Roman, once it has been established that the incarnate Word was born under Augustus Caesar and suffered under Pontius Pilate. Eusebius is content with what proved to be apocryphal tales of the correspondence between Jesus and Abgar king of Edessa, and between Pilate and the emperor Tiberius;[11] these are significant in the construction of chronology, not the history of Rome. We next meet, however, with the transposition of Christian history into two keys of enormous future importance: that of the history of philosophy, and that of the history of heresy. As Josephus contributes to the supersession of Jewish history by his narrative of the fall of the Temple, Philo of Alexandria blends Jewish thought with the philosophy of Pythagoras and Plato, a move which will massively reinforce both Christian orthodoxy and heresy. Eusebius's treatment of Philo is extensive;[12] he was as he wrote at the point of involvement in an increasingly philosophical debate as to the exact meaning of 'Logos' in the cardinal formulae of the Fourth Gospel. Philo also leaves an account of the Therapeutae, a probably Jewish ascetic sect known to him; it is noteworthy that *philosophia* and its cognates are here used to denote a communal discipline and way of life, founded on the allegorical use of esoteric writings.[13] The many meanings of this word will play their part in the history beginning to develop.

In Acts viii it is related how the Apostle Philip took refuge from Jewish persecution in Samaria and preached Christ to that people whom the Jews hated. He here encountered a sorcerer named Simon, whose wonders made some believe that he was himself a power of God. Simon was baptised by Philip, but offered money to him, Peter and John for the authority to confer the Holy Ghost; for this they rebuked him and he repented.[14] No more is said about Simon in the canonical narrative, though there was a tradition that he subsequently appeared at Rome and was cast down by Peter and Paul after a display of levitation. In Eusebius, however, he plays a far more momentous role: that of Simon Magus, the originator of all heresies.[15] These, furthermore, take the form known as gnosticism: an altogether alien theology, or rather theosophy, incompatible with either creation or incarnation. Simon's only competitors are the false teachers propounding a *gnōsis*, met with by Paul at Corinth and Colossae.[16] Whether these were Jews or Greeks will be a problem for historians. The history of heresy and orthodoxy has begun, in a form far removed from that in which Gibbon chose to tell it.

[11] Eusebius, I, xiii, 5–22 (in Lake, 1926, pp. 86–97); II, ii, 1–3 (in Lake, 1926, pp. 110–12).
[12] Eusebius, II, v, xvii, xviii. [13] Lake, 1926, pp. 146–57. [14] Acts viii, 9–24.
[15] Eusebius, II, xiii–xv (in Lake, 1926, pp. 136–43). [16] Chadwick, 1967, pp. 33–4.

(II)

We are concerned here with the accounts of heresy that Gibbon derived, or could have derived, from his ancient and recent sources. Eusebius took his accounts of the gnostic heresies (as he termed them) from writers of the late second century, a hundred years or more before his time, who supplied yet another narrative to the history of Christianity that took shape. He relied particularly on Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons, on Epiphanius of Salamis in Cyprus, and to a lesser degree on the Latin Tertullian's invective against the heresiarch Marcion. Justin supplied an account of Simon Magus which enlarged him into the originator of gnostic heresy: he performed

δὶα τῆς τῶν ἐνεργούντων δαιμονων τὲχνης δυναμεις πὸιησας μαγικας . . . θεος ἐνομίσθη . . . καὶ σχεδον πάντες μεν Σαμαρεῖς, ὀλιγοι δὲ καὶ ἐν ἀλλοις ἐθνὲσιν, ὡς πρῶτον θεον ἐκεῖνον ὁμολογοῦντες, προσκυνοῦσι. Καὶ Ελένην τινα, τὴν συμπερινοστήσασαν ἀυτῷ κατ᾽ ἐκεῖνο του καιροῦ, προτερον ἐπι τεγους σταθεισαν, τὴν ἀπ᾽ αυτου ἐννοιαν πρωτην γενομένην λεγουσι.[17]

[mighty acts of magic, by virtue of the art of the devils operating in him . . . He was considered a god . . . and almost all the Samaritans, and a few even of other nations, worship him, and acknowledge him as the first god; and a woman called Helena, who went about with him at that time, and had formerly been a prostitute, they say is the first idea generated by him.][18]

Justin was himself born in Samaria, if not of native birth, and wrote that Simon had had a successor named Menander, who with others had taught many

καὶ ἀρνεῖσθαι τὸν ποιητὴν τοῦδε τοῦ πάντος θεὸν. ἄλλον δέ τινα, ὡς ὀντα μειζονα τὰ μείζονα παρα του ὸν ὁμολογεῖν πεποιηκὲναι. Παντες ὸι ἀπο τοῦτων ὀφμωμενοι, ὡς ἔρημεν, Χριστιανοὶ καλοῦνται, ου πρόπον καὶ ὸι ὀυ κοινωνοῦντες τῶν αὐτῶν δογμὰτων τοὶς φιλοσοφοις, τὸ ἐπικατηγορούμενον ὀνομα τῆς φιλοσοφίας κοινον ἔχουσιν.[19]

[to deny that God is the maker of this universe and to assert that some other, being greater than he, has done greater works. All who take their opinions from these men are called Christians; just as those who do not agree with the philosophers in their doctrines, have yet in common with them the name of philosophers given to them.][20]

He was describing the invasion of both Christian belief and 'philosophy' – it has yet to be established what he meant by this term – by

[17] Justin, *First Apology*, 26, in Migne, 1857–94, VI, pp. 367–8.
[18] Roberts and Donaldson, 1867, p. 29. Cf. Lake, 2001, pp. 138–9, for Eusebius following Justin.
[19] Justin, *First Apology*, in Migne, 1857–94, VI, p. 368. [20] Roberts and Donaldson, 1867, p. 30.

a belief system alien to both, yet confounded with them. Eusebius took from Irenaeus a detailed account of many heresies current in the second Christian century; including the several kinds of gnosticism named for Basilides, Valentinus and Marcion, all supposed to be followers of the original Samaritans.[21] They are said to have had in common the belief that creation was an imperfect activity, the work of beings inferior to a God, who, being perfect and self-sufficient, had no need to create anything beyond himself. There arose a degenerative theogony recounting how these lesser deities had emerged by emanation from the absolute godhead – Gibbon had mentioned this in his account of Zoroaster[22] – as a hierarchy of aeons or *aiones*, whose names as reported by Irenaeus have an unmistakably synthetic sound;[23] we have before us a theosophy rather than a religion, an ancient Order of the Golden Dawn. Some of these beings struggled against the involvement of others in the imperfections of creation; Simon, working magic as 'the great power of God', might redeem others from the evils of matter, and Helena – a distant shadow of the Egyptian Isis – took the name of Sophia, a tragic figure polluted by those she had created in search of love. The crucial step was to make redemption the reversal of creation, and it was at this point that the figure of Jesus Christ became an actor in the cosmic struggle. Irenaeus, expanding the system of Basilides, depicted a society of lesser creator gods and a war arising among them:

> Esse autem principem ipsorum eum, qui Judaeorum putatur esse Deus. Et quoniam hic suis hominibus, id est Judaeis, voluit subjicere reliquas gentes, reliquos omnes principes contra stetisse ei et contra egisse. Quapropter et reliquae resiluerunt gentes eius genti. Innatum autem et innominatum Patrem videntem perditionem ipsorum, misisse primogenitum Nun suum (et hunc esse qui dicitur Christus), in libertatem credentium ei, a potestate eorum qui mundum fabricaverunt . . .
>
> Et liberatos igitur eos, qui haec sciant, a mundi fabricatoribus principibus: et non oportere confiteri eum qui sit crucifixus, sed eum qui in hominis forma venerit, et putatus sit crucifixus, et vocatus sit Jesus, et missus a Patre, uti per dispositionem hanc opera mundi fabricatorum dissolveret. Si quis igitur, ait, confitetur crucifixum, adhuc hic servus est, et sub potestate eorum qui corpora fecerunt: qui autem negaverit, liberatus est quidem ab iis, cognoscit autem dispositionem innati Patris.[24]

[21] Eusebius, IV, vii, xi. For Irenaeus's account, Roberts and Rambaud, 1868, pp. 85–112.
[22] Womersley, 1994, I, p. 216. [23] Roberts and Rambaud, 1868, pp. 4–6.
[24] Irenaeus, I, xxxiv, in Migne, 1857–94, VII, pp. 676–7. The text of Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, is extant wholly in a Latin translation, fragmentarily in the original Greek.

[The chief of them is he who is thought to be the God of the Jews; and inasmuch as he desired to render the other nations subject to his own people, that is the Jews, all the other princes resisted and opposed him. Wherefore all other nations were at enmity with his nation.]

If orthodox Christianity made the Jews a guilty and outcast people, the Basilideans are remote begetters of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

[But the father without birth and without name, perceiving that they would be destroyed, sent his own first begotten Nous (he it is who is called Christ) to bestow deliverance on them that believe in him, from the power of those that made the world . . . Those, then, who know these things have been freed from the principalities who formed the world; so that it is not incumbent on us to confess him who was crucified, but him who came in the form of a man, and was thought to be crucified, and was called Jesus, and was sent by the father, that by this disposition he might destroy the works of the makers of the world. If anyone, therefore, he [Basilides] declares, confess the crucified, that man is still a slave, and under the powers of those who formed our bodies; but he who denies him has been freed from these beings, and is acquainted with the dispensation of the unborn father.][25]

We are redeemed from created matter and the imperfect gods who made it by knowledge of the true story of the universe. This knowledge is called *gnōsis*; it might be the self-abolishing contemplation of a Buddhist, but seems to bring power (perhaps magical) and to enjoin esoteric behaviour.

Igitur qui didicerit, et Angelos omnes cognoverit, et causa eorum, invisibilem et incomprehensibilem eum Angelis et Potestatibus universes fieri, quemadmodum et Caulacau fuisse. Et sicut Filium incognitum omnibus esse, sic et ipsos a nemine oportere cognosci; sed cum sciant ipsi omnes et per omnes transeant, ipsos omnibus invisibiles et incognitos esse. Tu enim, aiunt, omne cognosce, te autem nemo cognoscat. Quapropter et parati sunt ad negationem, qui sunt tales, imo magis ne pati quidem propter nomen possunt, cum sint omnibus similes. Non autem multos scire posse haec, sed unum a mille, et duo a myriadibus. Et Judaeos quidem jam non esse dicunt. Christianos autem nondum: et non oportere omnino ipsorum mysteria effari, sed in abscondito continere per silentium.[26]

[He, then, who has learned these things, and known all the angels and their causes, is rendered invisible and incomprehensible to the angels and all the powers, even as [Jesus][27] was. And as the son was unknown to all, so must they also be known by no one; but while they know all, and pass through all, they themselves remain invisible and unknown to all; for 'Do thou', they say, 'know all, but let nobody know thee.' For this reason, persons of such a persuasion are also ready to recant

[25] Roberts and Rambaud, 1868, pp. 91–2. [26] Irenaeus, I, xxiv, in Migne, 1857–94, VII, p. 679.
[27] The name of Jesus is at this point rendered as 'Caulacau', for reasons which need not detain us.

their opinions, yea rather, it is impossible that they should suffer on account of a mere name, since they are like to all. The multitude, however, cannot understand these matters, but only one out of a thousand, or two out of ten thousand. They declare that they are no longer Jews, and that they are not yet Christians; and that it is not at all fitting to speak openly of their mysteries, but right to keep them secret by preserving silence.][28]

This self-perfecting arrogance is the consequence of worshipping a God whose perfection reduces itself and him to self-knowledge. Justin, Irenaeus and Eusebius opposed the *gnōsis* with the Logos, that is to say with a God eternally active, knowing and known in relation to himself. God was a creator, making the world and human beings in his own image; there had never been a time when he was not active as the Logos, so that action and mutual knowledge were inherent in his own being. As the Logos had been made Flesh, and since the Logos was the Word, Jesus Christ had been both the person in whom the divine word had spoken and the Word speaking itself in the world and human history. Primarily, this was a doctrine of God's being, as unlike the unmoved perfection the Fathers attributed to the gnostics as they could make it; it was also a doctrine of the Church's being, its authority and history.

The Gospels themselves, it was now claimed, had in two cases been reduced to writing as a means of opposition to the *gnōsis*. That according to Mark was the work of a member of the entourage of the Apostle Peter, engaged at Rome in his climactic struggle against Simon Magus; Peter had preached the Word with such power and clarity as to create a demand for it in written form.[29] That according to John was the subject of another narrative. The statements concerning the Logos with which it opens – of cardinal importance to the entire orthodox position – were said to be the work of the Apostle John the Evangelist at an advanced age, perhaps one hundred years, which set him apart from his fellows and made his death the effective end of the apostolic era. He had written his Gospel, after preaching it orally for many years, perhaps at Ephesus, in response to the heresies of a certain Cerinthus,[30] a possibly fictitious figure concerning whom many tales were told. Here the narrative of heresy became more complex. There was said – it is necessary to simplify – to have existed a sect called the Ebionites, possibly originating among Jewish converts to Christianity, who held that though Jesus had been the Messiah sent by God, he had been no more than a man, begotten by Joseph in the ordinary

[28] Roberts and Rambaud, 1868, pp. 92–3. [29] Eusebius, II, xv, in Lake, 1926, pp. 142–5.
[30] Eusebius, III, xxvii, in Lake, 1926, pp. 262–6.

way.[31] It had been possible, however, to move from the Ebionite position towards the contention that Christ was the name of a divine power or being, that had descended upon Jesus and left him at his crucifixion; and toward the gnostic contention that this Christ was an aeonic being, sent to liberate mankind from the creator Jehovah. At this point there would seem to occur a breach with any theology compatible with the Jewish past, and in the debatable ground between Ebionites and gnostics many positions and confusions were possible. There is consequently a diversity of heresies and syntheses of heresy attributed to the heresiarch Cerinthus, but a consensus of traditions grew up according to which the last of the Apostles was his principal adversary and had committed the Word to writing in order to confute him. Irenaeus summed it up.

Hanc fidem annuntians Joannes Domini discipulus, volens per Evangelii annuntiationem auferre eum, qui a Cerintho inseminatus erat hominibus, errorem, et multo prius ab his qui dicuntur Nicolaitae, qui sunt vulsio ejus, quae falso cognominatur scientia, ut confunderet eos, et suaderet quoniam unus Deus qui omnia fecit per Verbum suum; et non, quemadmodum illi dicunt, alterum quidem fabricatorem, alium autem Patrem Domini; et alium quidem fabricatoris filium, alterum vero de superioribus, Christum quem et impassibilem perseverasse, descendentem in Jesum filium fabricatoris, et iterum, revolasse in suum Pleroma: et initium quidem esse Monogenem, Logon autem verum filium Unigeniti: et eam conditionem quae est secundum nos, non a primo Deo factam, sed a virtute aliqua valde deorsum subjecta, et abscissa ab eorum communicatione, quae sunt invisibilia et innominabilia. Omnia igitur talia circumscribere volens discipulus Domini, et regulam veritatis constituere in Ecclesia, quia est unus Deus omnipotens, qui per Verbum suum omnia fecit, et visibilia, et invisibilia; significans quoque, quoniam per Verbum, per quod deus perfecit conditionem, in hoc et salutem his qui in conditione sunt, praestitit hominibus; sic inchoavit in ea, quae est secundum Evangelium, doctrina: 'In principio erat Verbum'.[32]

[John, the disciple of the Lord, preaches this faith, and seeks, by the proclamation of the gospel, to remove that error which by Cerinthus had been disseminated among men, and a long time previously by those termed Nicolaitans, who are an offset of that 'knowledge' falsely so called, that he might confound them and persuade them that there is but one God, who made all things by his Word; and not, as they allege, that the Creator was one, but the Father of the Lord another; and that the Son of the Creator was, forsooth, one, but the Christ from above another, who also continued impassible,[33] descending upon Jesus, the Son of the Creator, and flew back again into his Pleroma; and that Monogenes was the beginning, but Logos was the true son of Monogenes;[34] and that this creation to

[31] Eusebius, III, xxvii, in Lake, 1926, pp. 260–3. For Irenaeus, see Roberts and Rambaud, 1868, p. 97.
[32] Irenaeus, III, xi, in Migne, 1857–94, VII, p. 879. [33] I.e. incapable of suffering.
[34] These are aeonic names.

which we belong was not made by the primary God, but by some power lying far below him, and shut off from communion with the things invisible and ineffable. The disciple of the Lord, therefore, desiring to put an end to all such doctrines, and to establish the rule of truth in the Church, that there is one almighty God who made all things by his Word, both visible and invisible; showing at the same time that by the Word, through whom God made the Creation, he also bestowed salvation on the men included in the Creation; thus commenced his teaching in the gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word'.][35]

It is important to realise that here we have the bedrock of the sacred history Gibbon was attacked for not giving – whatever the terms in which eighteenth-century divines demanded that it be given. The universe is the continued activity of the creating and salvific Word of God; Jesus Christ was that Word made Flesh and speaking. At his departure he left the Word to speak itself and the Church as a body of men and women to speak it. The Word was not a body of doctrine to be believed or disbelieved, but an active and performative speech, to be heard and then to be spoken; it authorised the Church and the Church spoke by its authority. The Epistle to the Corinthians declared how the simple act of hearing, believing and speaking the Word set itself above the wisdom of either Jews or Greeks.[36] Acts depicted Paul addressing Athenian philosophers who desired only 'to hear some new thing'.[37] Justin Martyr recalled how, being worn out by the competitive disputes of philosophers, he encountered an aged man who made the liberating suggestions that the Word had spoken itself in human form and time and that to hear and to receive it was more than to dispute it – an experience closer to conversion than to conviction. From this moment the life of the Church became the continuous speaking of the Word and the continuous authority of those authorised to speak it. Irenaeus once more:

Γνῶσις ἀληθης, ἡ τῶν ἀποστολων διδαχἠ, καὶ τὸ ἀρχαἰον τῆς Ἐκκλησίας σύστημα κατὰ παντὸς τοῦ κοσμου.

Agnitio vera est apostolorum doctrina, et antiquus Ecclesiae status in universo mundo, et character corporis Christi secundum successiones episcoporum, quibus illi eam, quae in unoquoque loco est, Ecclesiam tradiderunt: quae pervenit usque ad nos custoditione sine fictione Scripturarum tractatio plenissima, neque ablationem recipiens: et lectio sine falsatione, et secundum Scripturas expositio legitima et diligens, et sine periculo, et sine blasphemia; et praecipuum dilectionis munus, quod est pretiosus quam agnitio, gloriosius autem quam prophetia, omnibus autem reliquis charismatibus supereminentius.[38]

[35] Roberts and Rambaud, 1868, pp. 287–8. [36] 1 Corinthians i, 17–31, ii, 13–16.
[37] Acts xvii, 21. [38] Irenaeus, IV, xxxiii, in Migne, 1857–94, VII, pp. 1077–8.

[True knowledge [*gnōsis*] is the doctrine of the Apostles, and the ancient constitution of the Church throughout all the world, and the distinctive manifestation of the body of Christ according to the succession of the bishops, by which they have handed down that church which exists in every place, and has come even unto us, being guarded and preserved, without any forging of scriptures, by a very complete system of doctrine, and neither receiving addition nor curtailment; reading without falsification, and a lawful and diligent exposition in harmony with the scriptures, without danger and without blasphemy; and the pre-eminent gift of love, which is more precious than knowledge, more glorious than prophecy, and excels all the other gifts.][39]

This again Gibbon could never have said. He perceived only that the Word conferred authority, and supposed that it was spoken in order to confer it on human actors, in this case significantly the bishops. He had never much to say about the *gnōsis*, but might have joined a modern liberal in supposing that its privacy and indeterminacy rendered it less dangerous to liberty. On the other hand, its secrecy and esotericism meant that it could never be spoken in public, whereas the Logos claimed authority but as Logos might be questioned. The great debates came after the establishment of the Christian religion.

In recent scholarship – which has followed new and exciting paths since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi scrolls – a point has been reached where Irenaeus is credited with establishing the canon of four Gospels culminating in John's. He is an originator of both orthodoxy and priestcraft; the former the more unforgivable, since orthodoxy is held to blame for all the problems which follow its establishment. The Gospel ascribed to John is seen as affirming a coldly intellectual religion, in which access to the divine (a person) is mediated through priests and interpreted by theologians; the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas affirms a deeply evangelical (and American) religion, in which all men and women are equal before God and entitled to participation in a universal love so far diffused that Christ comes close to absorption into his own congregation.[40] In this version of the narrative, the term 'gnosticism' is critically examined and tends to disappear. We cease to hear of its supposed tenets: the imperfect creator and creation, Christ as the bringer of *gnōsis* which frees humans from both; and gnosticism and Manichaeism are acknowledged only as alternative forms of Christianity, never as partly alien alternatives to it. The present writer is without authority in these matters. This volume, however, presents a history of Christian historiography as that of a complex and passionate debate, in which the Basilidean and Valentinian schools described by Irenaeus, and

[39] Roberts and Rambaud, 1868, p. 11. [40] For this see especially Pagels, 2004.

the Manichaean movement that followed them, were accepted as realities and their character intensively debated; with what consequences we have yet to see.

We have reached the identity of truth and authority. The Word authorises the bishop to speak it, but it is the uninterrupted succession of bishops which authorises the belief that it is the Word that is being spoken. Eusebius must constantly be documenting this succession, as far as his information permits, but this narrative is linked with another. Together with the enumeration of successive heresies, the *Ecclesiastical History* is increasingly concerned with the persecutions of the Church and the consequent martyrology. The persecutions begin sporadically under Nero and Domitian, become a regulated police procedure under Trajan and the Antonines, and swell into a state-directed campaign first under Decius and then under Diocletian. Gibbon had left this story untold in his first fourteen chapters, but the last phase became of such overmastering importance to Eusebius that he changed the character, and perhaps the intention,[41] of his history. In the wars of the tetrarchs after Diocletian, it became reason of state either to enforce or to suspend prosecution of the Christians, and the climax of the narrative was Constantine's move from tolerating their religion to establishing it. Here civil history came close to sacred; the identification of empire with religion might be the prelude to its final triumph on earth. To indicate as much was one of the purposes with which Eusebius wrote his history; but there were others. The record of the martyrs was a triumph of faith over suffering, and the horrible details of their sufferings – especially when they were women – descended at times towards a pornography of holiness. It is to be stressed, however, that this is still the history of the Word, persisting after its incarnation and ascension. Christian martyrs were witnesses, as the name signified; they testified to the continuity of the Word, and by their deaths as well as their confessions continued to speak it. The Word was its own power, and the martyrs came in the course of history to join the long ranks of authority-bearers – angels, prophets, apostles, fathers, saints – whose figures line the great churches of baroque Europe and make the journey to the altar a procession of the Church in its majesty. When Gibbon sought to reduce their numbers, and to reduce persecution from a display of satanic depravity to a problem in the history of toleration – we shall see how he went about this – he was perceived, very probably with justice, as intending to diminish the Church and deny sacred history.

[41] Lake, 1926, pp. xxi–ii; Barnes, 1981, pp. 148–50.

(III)

With Justin we encounter – this is not to say that he originated – the opposition, and complex relation, between the utterance of the Word and the pursuit of philosophy, which is to supply new themes in the narrative of Christian history. He is described, and describes himself, as a 'philosopher': one of a social type recognisable in later classical culture – a period sometimes known as 'the Second Sophistic' – by their dress and their behaviour, while practising diverse activities. A philosopher was known by the cut of his beard and cloak; Justin did not abandon this dress when he became a Christian.[42] Christianity might be considered a 'philosophy', and this term is occasionally used by Christians of themselves. This is the point, however, at which we need to recognise that *philosophos* and *philosophia* were words used with a variety of meanings. *Philosophia* could denote the discipline and way of life of any withdrawn or ascetic sect; Eusebius, following Philo, uses it of the Egyptian Therapeutae, whom he is prepared to think possibly Christian or proto-Christian,[43] and at a later point Gibbon was to encounter – with an incredulous horror to which only capitals could give expression – a description of monasticism as a DIVINE PHILOSOPHY.[44] The words could be extended to cover Christian belief and behaviour; but the case of Justin once more reminds us that something happened when he became a Christian without ceasing to be a philosopher. His encounter with the aged man (who was by some considered an angel) has begun telling us what this something was, but to understand the setting in which it happened we must continue exploring the meanings of 'philosophy'.

If this word could denote the practices and disciplines of a sect of disciples, it might follow that they were disciples of a 'philosopher'. The word might be applied to Simon Magus, unless he had been too diabolic a deceiver to be termed other than a sorcerer or magician. It might – or might it? – be applied to one preaching the incarnate Word, except that as early as the Epistles there was language suggesting that the Word was more than philosophy and philosophy not quite equal to it. Justin declares as much, yet by remaining a philosopher suggests that philosophy may be informed by the Word and assimilated to it; but when philosophy propounds the

[42] Barnard, 1967, p. 11. For a description drawn from St Jerome and a work by William Cave, see Le Clerc, BUH, 1968, II, pp. 13–14. It was a cloak worn over the naked body, without an under-tunic. Hypatia who was murdered at Alexandria is said to have worn it over her dress. This must have made the sight of her beardless female face, uttering philosophy, even more challenging.

[43] N. 13, above. [44] DF, III, ch. 37; Womersley, 1994, II, p. 412.

Word it brings its own discourse with it. We cannot pursue this problem, however, without considering the ways in which Justin used the term 'philosophy'; and here we encounter the history of philosophy, which to our own day is written differently by historians and by philosophers.

A 'philosopher' in the second century AD might be almost any kind of wandering teacher, impressing princes or citizens with his apparent power or wisdom; and it has been suggested that there had occurred a revival of the Cynic persuasion, so that 'philosopher' might denote an ancient equivalent of the beatnik, who had rejected respectable society. Such a figure may propound a doctrine of the universe, a metaphysics and ethics, which makes him a 'philosopher' as we are prepared to use the term; but if his doctrine proclaims a power or force – indeed a *logos* – active in the universe, to speak it may be a source of power in himself, even of his power over it. He begins to work wonders as well as to speak them; the philosopher becomes a thaumaturge or magician, as Simon Magus did, or according to Gibbon the neo-Platonists. (Here Hobbes had developed his account of philosophers as a plague of impostors infesting the ancient world.) In mentioning Simon we return to the point at which magic is linked with the false philosophy, or theosophy, of the gnostics; but though Justin Martyr took a leading part in establishing this equation, it is not central to his account of his experience at the point where philosophy became Christian. Here he is using the term in a different sense.

Justin as a cloaked and bearded philosopher had been frequenting the schools originating at Athens, where a diversity of *sectae* or *haereseis* were systematically taught by successive accredited teachers in competition or dialogue with one another, and graduates of these schools might be met travelling the roads of the empire. Here philosophy was institutionalised in oral and written rhetorics, and we meet with histories of philosophy written in the form with which we are familiar: histories of disputes between intellectual systems, intelligible and valuable to practitioners of a systematic discourse and occasionally written by them. Such histories appear in the third century, but are not part of the story which Justin tells of himself. He says that he had moved from one to another of the recognised schools, Stoic, Pythagorean and finally Platonist, but though deeply attracted by the last was dissatisfied by them all, for the reason that the disputes between them appeared open-ended, inconclusive and incapable of being brought to finality or closure. Platonism especially made him believe that knowledge of God was possible, but did not bring him to the point of attaining it.[45] At this point he encountered the aged mentor or heavenly messenger, who

[45] See his *Dialogue with Trypho*: Barnard, 1967, pp. 6–11.

suggested to him that the Word had been spoken, had been incarnated as a being active in time, and that what was available and necessary was not a continued logomachy but the reorientation of personality by the Logos himself.

We are here at the point crucial to both ancient and modern thinking, where the philosophic intellect challenges or is challenged by the language of the Fourth Gospel. The Word is, or is not, more than can be said about it; from which it follows that discourse about the Word should or should not, must or may not, be inconclusive. Justin presents himself as exhausted and dissatisfied by the inconclusiveness of philosophy; but by Gibbon's time it was possible – and in our own time is almost inescapable – to prefer philosophy precisely because it is inconclusive, and so open-ended. Justin is about to prefer a revealed Word, spoken for all time because it is spoken from beyond time, bringing conversion and rebirth rather than a conviction which may or may not be final after all. Our culture prefers the non-finality of speech and the certainty of doubt;[46] and in Gibbon's time there were many who insisted that the Logos could not be stated with finality, whether their conclusions were devotional – Christ was more than could ever be said of him – or sceptical: he was no more than could be said about him. There was also the question of authority; the incarnate Word must act through human transmitters; and once we began asking (as we must) about the moment in human time when the Word had become incarnate, the context might determine the moment, new sceptical questions might be asked, and the divinity of Jesus itself might come to be questioned. Most Enlightened and some Protestant criticism of Christian theology was based on rejection of its Platonist foundations. The laying of those foundations may be seen as beginning with Justin Martyr, and first it must be noted that his account of 'philosophy' has little to do with gnosticism. We know him as an early narrator of the descent of gnosticism from Simon Magus the sorcerer; but though the term 'philosopher' could be extended to cover wandering mystagogues and magicians, these were unwelcome in the Grove, the Garden and the Porch. Justin is interested in the relation of the philosophic intellect to the Word that supersedes it, but is prepared to regard the former as preparing the way for the latter. This way was to be tangled and treacherous in the highest degree, but took its departure from Athens before Alexandria. It became a question, for ancients and early moderns alike, whether the gnostics Valentinus and Basilides were primarily Christian heretics who had mistaken the nature of the Johannine Logos, or whether their rejection of creation as the work of

[46] For this phrase I am indebted to the late Peter Munz (Fairburn and Oliver, 1996, and Munz, 2004).

God had deeper and culturally alien roots. Justin did not think this was part of the problem of what Athens had to do with Jerusalem – or rather with Bethlehem. He was embarked on the enterprise first of criticising Greek philosophy, then of reconciling it with the Christian message: a central enterprise for both philosophy and humanism thereafter.

There opened up what was almost, if never quite, a new dimension of sacred history, in which the Logos has a history before its incarnation, in the form of philosophy among the Greeks as well as in the prophecies of Israel. The Greeks share this history with others, but it is noteworthy that they provide much of the vocabulary in which it is stated. It is neither Greek, biblical nor gnostic, however, that Justin's history of philosophy starts unequivocally from a Christian assertion that the pagan gods were demons, in the malignant sense of devils. These beings appeared to men in such terrifying forms that they were worshipped as gods.

ὅτε δὲ Σωκράτης λόγω ἀληθεῖ καὶ ἐξεκαστικῶς ταῦτα εἰς φανερὸν ἐπειρᾶτο φέρειν, καὶ ἀπάγειν τῶν δαιμόνων τοὺς ἀνθρώπους, καὶ αὐτοι οἱ δαιμόνες διὰ τῶν χαιρόντων τῇ κακία ἀνθρωπων ἐνήργηαν ὡς ἀθεον καὶ ἀσεβῆ ἀποκτεὶναι, λεγοντες καινὰ ἐισφερειν ἀυτον δαιμονια. Καὶ ὁμοῖως ἐφ᾽ ἡμων το αυτὸ ἐνεργουσιν. Ὀυ γάρ μόνον Ἕλλησι διὰ Σωκράτους ὑπο Λόγου ἠλεγθη ταῦτα, ἀλλα καὶ ἐν ΒαρΒαροις ὑπ᾽ ἀυτου του Λογου μορφωθέντος καὶ ἀνθρώπου γενομένου, και Ἰησοῦ Χριστοὺ κληθεντος. Ὡ πεισθεντες ἡμεις, τους ταῦτα πράξαντας δαίμονας ὀυ μόνον μὴ ὀρθοὺς ἐιναι φαμὲν, ἀλλα κακους καὶ ἀνοσίους δαίμονας, ὁι ὀυδὲ τοις ἀρετὴν ποθοῦσιν ἀνθρωποις τὰς πρὰξεις ὁμοίας ἐχουσι.[47]

[And when Socrates endeavoured, by true reason and examination, to bring those things to light, and deliver men from the demons, then the demons themselves, by means of men who rejoiced in iniquity, compassed his death, as an atheist and as a profane person, on the charge that he was introducing new divinities; and in our case [Justin is addressing the Antonine emperors on behalf of the Christians] they display a similar activity. For not only among the Greeks did the Logos proceed to condemn those things through Socrates, but also among the Barbarians were they condemned by the Logos Himself, who took shape and became man, and was called Jesus Christ; and in obedience to Him, we not only deny that they who did such things as these are gods (*daimones*), but assert that they are wicked and impious demons (*daimones*), whose actions will not bear comparison with those even of men desirous of virtue.][48]

This is not Enlightened history; it takes place not in the workings of human minds, but in a universe of contesting spiritual beings, the Logos and the demons. Here the gnostic heresies briefly appear; Simon, Helena

[47] Justin, *First Apology*, 5, in Migne, 1857–94, VIII, p. 335.

[48] Roberts and Donaldson, 1868, pp. 10–11. The translation might be improved by eliminating the distinction between gods and demons.

and their fellow Samaritan Menander are sent by the demons to deceive. Justin accepts the Greek description of all non-Greeks as 'barbarians', but it is among the barbarians (i.e. the Jews) that the Logos is made Flesh and becomes man. What then was the status of the Logos working through Socrates? The mind of man or a spiritual power? His own *daimon* is not mentioned in this passage, but can have been neither God himself nor one of his angels. To us Socrates is a martyr, a witness to the duty or necessity of pursuing philosophy wherever it may lead; but Justin has something else in mind.

Σωκράτει μὲν γὰρ οὐδεὶς ἐπιστεύθη, ὑπὲρ τούτου του δόγματος ἀποθνήσκειν. Χριστῷ δὲ τῷ καὶ ὑπὸ Σωκράτους ἀπὸ μέρους, γνωσθέντι (Λόγος γὰρ ἦν καὶ ἔστιν ὁ ἐν παντὶ ὤν, καὶ διὰ τῶν προφητῶν προειπὼν τὰ μελλοντα γίνεσθαι, καὶ δι' ἑαυτοῦ ὁμοιοπαθοῦς γενομένου καὶ διδάξαντος ταῦτα), οὐ ψιλοσὸφοι οὐδὲ φιλόλογοι μὸνον ἐπείσθησαν, ἀλλὰ καὶ χειροτέχναι, καὶ παντελῶς ἰδιῶται, καὶ δὸξης καὶ φόδου καὶ θανάτου καταφρονήσαντες. ἐπειδη δύναμίς ἐστι τοῦ ἀῤῥήτου Πατρὸς, καὶ οὐχὶ ἀνθρωπείου λογου τὰ σκεύη.[49]

[For no one trusted in Socrates so as to die for his doctrine, but in Christ (for He was and is the Word who is in every man, and who foretold the things that were to come to pass, both through the prophets and in His own person when he was made of like passions and taught those things) not only philosophers and scholars believed, but also artisans and people entirely uneducated, despising both glory, and fear, and death; since He is a power of the ineffable Father, and not the mere instrument of human reason.][50]

The martyrs are illiterate for the same reason as the Apostles; the Word speaks through both and is not a *gnōsis* of the learned. But there is now a new history and almost a second chosen people. The Word is made known before its incarnation, to the Greeks through philosophy as to the Jews through prophecy. The Greeks are in no danger of apostasy, since they have been party to no covenant; but they are in danger of heresy, since philosophy may mistake the nature of the Logos, already a word in its vocabulary. The knowledge of the schools of Athens must be rewritten so as to show how close it comes to the true Logos, and why it can come no closer. This history, and philosophy, were taken up after Justin's time by Clement of Alexandria, who set out to prove that Greek ideas of the universe were derived in fragmentary form from the forgotten knowledge originally revealed to Moses, and then – paralleling the history put together by Diogenes Laertius – to show how the history of Athenian philosophy might be reassembled eclectically and made into a semblance of the Christian

[49] Justin, *Second Apology*, 10, in Migne, 1857–94, VI, p. 462.
[50] Roberts and Donaldson, 1868, p. 80.

truth. Here we enter on the history of philosophy, as constructed by the Christians and reconstructed in the early Enlightenment.

Clement's position is that there is now a new evangel: the Logos has been made Flesh and has dwelt among us. This he calls a 'new song', perhaps in allusion to the Canticle of the Virgin in St Luke.[51] To explicate his meaning, he needs a history of the term Logos, which is a Greek word though manifestations of the Logos have been made to the Hebrews, and this history is necessarily a history of philosophy. The earliest Greek philosophy, he says, was barbaric in origin, meaning by that word that it was not Greek and was in fact Jewish. Pythagoras and Plato derived their knowledge of God from Moses, by which Clement hopes to convey that they knew of a God who had made all things by his Word or Logos.[52] He opposes this knowledge to the false idea of a God who is not a creator. That God vouchsafed philosophy to the Greeks made them in a secondary sense a chosen people, knowing the Logos before it came to earth; his gift will be called, by later translators of Clement, an '*alliance*' in French and even a 'covenant' in English,[53] though a covenant in the Old Testament sense it cannot be. Like the Jews, however, the Greeks are capable of backsliding, in their case into heresies, and Clement has a long invective against those philosophers, from the Ionians to the Stoics, who wrongly seek for impersonal principles, instead of God, at the origin of the universe.[54] This error opens the door to magian dualisms of Persian origin – not merely 'barbaric' but Gentile – and of course to the false teachings of the gnostics. Clement's aim is to retain Platonic philosophy, as far as possible, as a system capable of recognising a Father who creates and a Son through whom he both creates and redeems. The debate for some centuries was to be one on how far this could be done. He embarks on a history of Greek philosophy,[55] close to that constructed on 'eclectic' lines by Diogenes Laertius, and says there is a Christian[56] eclecticism which selects not only that philosophy which satisfies philosophers, but that which is compatible with the New Song and foresees it.

(iv)

A third agency had now entered the interplay of barbarism and religion – the former term here used in its original sense of 'other than Greek'. This agency was philosophical: a cultural phenomenon occurring in the Greek

[51] Wilson, 1867–74, i, p. 22. [52] Ibid., pp. 395–400.
[53] Ibid., p. 366; [Le Clerc], 1701, pp. 20–2. [54] Wilson, 1867–74, i, pp. 67–8.
[55] Ibid., pp. 391–4. [56] Ibid., pp. 358, 374.

world in forms inclusive of its central meaning, the successive schools that had taken shape at Athens. Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria were embarking on the enterprise of annexing 'philosophy' to the Christian Word and including it in the latter's sacred history: a major step in the Mission to the Gentiles that had been begun by the Apostles. It was a step dangerous to the extent that philosophy, in one form or another, might succeed in annexing the Word rather than being annexed to it, and there already existed 'heresies', alternative to the Johannine Logos, with which 'philosophy' might have to deal. Justin had severed 'gnosticism' from 'philosophy' by deriving it from Samaritan magicians, and its origins, other than diabolical, remained unclear; the link between the two concepts appears later. Meanwhile, there was the more general question whether the human intellect could be annexed to Christianity and made supportive of it, or whether no link with the enterprise of Greek philosophy could be found. What was to become of the Mission to the Gentiles?

The central assertions of what was to become orthodox Christianity may be summarised – at whatever risk – as follows. There is one God the Father, maker of heaven and earth. The person in whom he acts among humans is the Word or Logos, which has been with God and is God. This Word has been made Flesh and has dwelt among men. The purpose of this sojourn has been the redemption of men from their sins and it will be crucially necessary that the Creator and the Redeemer be one in substance; but we shall find redemption little discussed in Gibbon's sources as he read them, and hardly at all in the *Decline and Fall*. The debate between the orthodox – Justin, Irenaeus, Eusebius – and those whom they opposed turned overwhelmingly on the question of creation, and on the perceived inability of the latter to conceive that God had created the world, in particular the material world, *ex nihilo* or out of nothing. This stumbling block had emerged most dramatically in the systems of the gnostics, for whom the Creation was imperfect, matter necessarily the abode of death and sin, and creation therefore unworthy of God. The material world nevertheless existed, and what Gibbon elsewhere called the 'bold and injudicious attempt of eastern philosophy'[57] was to suppose an unmoved and absolute God who had no need to create, and two or more lesser gods who engaged in this activity or endeavoured to rectify its imperfections. There might be a dark god of matter, and a bright god of light, so far inherent in one another that their contest could have no end; there might be the Jewish god who had made the world and the

[57] DF, I, ch. 8; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 216.

Greek god (or Christ) who set us free of it by *gnōsis*. Enough was known of Zoroaster and his dualisms to permit the Christian writers to impute a Persian origin to the gnostic systems, especially when in a later chapter of Eusebius these reappear in a new form as Manichaeism;[58] it was hard to find within Greek or Christian thought alone a simple thread leading from a denial or distortion of the Incarnation to a denial of the Creation and the Creator. Gnostics might be Christian heretics, and it was assumed that most of them were; but their thought seemed to have been pervaded by elements Iranian and therefore 'barbarian' and 'oriental'. Indeed, a dualism that could not comprehend the Word made Flesh came to be part of the image of 'orientalism'. The synthetic deities known to Irenaeus as *aiones* belonged less to religions practised on the Euphrates or the Nile than to Hellenistic literary speculation on what these might be like.

But there was no need to venture into eastern dualism to find a similar series of unorthodoxies in Greek philosophy itself. If there could be no creation *ex nihilo*, matter could not have been created and God could not be a creator; at best a Demiurge like that in Plato's *Timaeus*, who had not created matter but had given form and intelligibility to its chaotic darkness. But creation *ex nihilo* was absolutely necessary if the Word by which all things were made, and which had been made Flesh for human redemption, was to have been with God and to have been God from the beginning. Here it became a question whether Athenian philosophy had been capable of such a view of creation, or whether the Christian Word could be added to it without distortion. It was well enough for Justin or Clement to tell the philosophers that the Logos had been made Man; if the Logos of the philosophers contained no way of saying this, how could it be a knowledge of the Word before incarnation?

The Logos of the Fourth Gospel (written in Greek) might be the reason which humans shared with God and by which philosophers had attained a knowledge of him not directly revealed. But to be capable of incarnation as a person, it must be – as the author of the Gospel had perhaps intended – something in the nature of the primal Platonic Idea, if it could be accepted that this Logos had created matter as well as merely shaping and forming it. In the setting of Jewish thought that lay beyond the Greek the Logos might be the 'Word of the Lord' that came to the prophets of Israel, or even the unutterable Tetragrammaton itself; there must be an agreed relationship between the foreknowledge of Christ offered to the Jews and that attained by the philosophers. The second-century Fathers had opened

[58] Eusebius, VII, xxix.

up the question of how these knowledges were related in a sequence of both sacred and Gentile (or barbarian) history; an immediate consequence was that, of the schools of Athens and Alexandria, it was the Platonic which had the most to say about the Logos, and was most challengingly confronted by John. The Word that had been made Flesh and dwelt among us was the Word by which all things had been made; a doctrine of incarnation entailed and demanded a doctrine of creation. The Platonic Logos, however, might be the word not of God but of a Demiurge who had shaped matter but not created it, and whose capacities were limited by this fact. From here it was possible to work back to a gnostic thesis, according to which Christ was the Word of one seeking to remedy the error of creation; Plato became one of the Gentile sages who could not fully accept the *ex nihilo*. There arose a succession of Platonising Fathers – among whom Origen became the most famous – aiming to restate the ancient wisdom so that it did not only anticipate, but actually contained, all that followed from the Johannine Incarnation. These probably created the text of the Three Witnesses;[59] certainly they confronted what seemed to be a Platonic Trinity, composed of God's being, his power and his wisdom, and tried to decide whether this could be made compatible with the Incarnation and the Trinity emerging from Johannine theology.

The problem was one of sacred history. If the Logos was both eternal and active, it must have been active before its incarnation, made known to Israel through prophecy and to Greeks – it was increasingly insisted – through philosophy. This was what Athens had to do with Jerusalem, if any equality could be admitted between a revelation made to barbarians and the philosophy established among the Greeks (the cultural chauvinists of the ancient world). Yet something astonishing and unexpected had occurred at Bethlehem and on Calvary, a stumbling block and foolishness to which neither prophecy nor philosophy was equal. The Jews had failed the test and had vanished terrifyingly from history; the Greeks (even if their philosophy was ultimately Jewish) were still confronting it, and claimed to furnish the language in which the astonishing could be defined and made intelligible. Yet this was to permit the wise to explain the foolishness by which they had been confounded; Paul on the Areopagus had been succeeded by the (apocryphal) Dionysius. It would be possible to describe the history of theology as the successful re-annexation of the Logos by the philosophers.

Confronted by the claim that the Word had been made Flesh, Christian philosophers did not deny it, but offered to supply the language, the

[59] For the history of this text and its critics down to Gibbon, see Levine, 1999, pp. 157–240.

discourse and the categories of thought in which it was to be asserted, defended and interpreted. While this was going on in Christian circles, there occurred, either marginally or anterior to them, two crucial developments. In regions including and transgressing the eastern borders of the empire, what seemed to be the older gnostic dualism recurred in the form of Manichaeism, a system which had enough to say about the person of Christ to be accounted a Christian heresy, and enough apparent debt to Zoroastrian dualism to be considered a Persian intrusion. Within the Greek-speaking world and particularly at Alexandria, there occurred a massive revival of Platonic and other doctrines, not Christian at all and in some cases a rearguard action of paganism, seeking to present the many cultic gods as manifestations of an ultimate deity who was neither creator nor Jehovah. The most intellectually powerful movement of this kind was what Gibbon had identified as neo-Platonism before his history of the Church began; and Eusebius followed an account of Origen,[60] chief among the Platonising Fathers, with one of Ammonius Sacca, founder of this school, himself perhaps to be considered Christian, but succeeded by Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus, who were not.[61]

As we move to Alexandria from Athens, where the schools continue an increasingly shadowy existence, there occurs or recurs a historiographical crux. We part company with both Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* and the fifteenth chapter of the *Decline and Fall*, to the extent that neither continues the history of theology and philosophy into the great debate of the early and middle fourth century, in which Eusebius himself was involved and with which Gibbon resumed, or began, his history of the Church in the chapters he did not publish until 1781. This was the debate between Arius and his opponents, including Athanasius, carried on through the Council of Nicaea into the ecclesiastical politics – themselves the phenomenon of a new kind of history – of the reigns between Constantine's and that of Julian the Apostate. It was a debate between theologians claiming to be orthodox Christians in the terms laid down by the Fourth Gospel, concerning the status in the godhead of the Logos that had been made Flesh in Jesus Christ; a Platonic debate as to the meaning of the Apostle John. It was also a debate to which the emperors were obliged to pay attention, in consequence of their establishment of Christianity, with its theological disputes, as the religion of the empire; and in terms of the problems explored in Gibbon's sixteenth chapter, it marked the beginnings of the persecution of Christians

[60] The sixth book of Eusebius's *History* is largely devoted to Origen.
[61] Eusebius, VI, xix, in Oulton, 1932/2000, II, pp. 59–61.

by Christians. Neither Eusebius in his *History* nor Gibbon in 1776 arrived at this episode, to which the latter might have been expected to proceed direct from the end of his fourteenth chapter. It is the question asked in this volume how far the fifteenth and sixteenth were necessary to prepare the way for it, or how effectively they had done so by the time Gibbon returned to it in 1781.

CHAPTER 2

The Catholic moderns: history and authority

(1)

To turn from Gibbon's ancient to his modern sources for ecclesiastical history is to pass over many centuries, almost a millennium and a half, during which time much was written and many changes in perception occurred. Gibbon did not survey this history, and the 'modern' sources he used were comparatively recent, belonging in nearly all cases to a period of about one hundred years before the publication of the *Decline and Fall*. Though in consequence all belong to the era of Reformation and Counter-Reformation, he makes no attempt to cover the ecclesiastical histories belonging to that era as a whole. Cardinal Baronius, the great Catholic historical compiler of the late sixteenth century, is indeed prominent, as both authority and target,[1] and may be said to form an exception; but the Catholic historians on whom Gibbon chiefly relied, and who form the subject of this chapter, were of the opinion that Baronius, though venerable, was now obsolete and not always reliable. Baronius's opponents, the Protestant Magdeburg Centuriators, are absent from Gibbon's text and references, and his sources may in general be said to belong to times later than Lutheran and Calvinist controversy with the Tridentine response to Reformation. His Catholic historians are French and belong to the *siècle de Louis XIV*: they are Gallican and Jansenist, and not more committed to a Roman view of church history than those adjectives imply and render necessary. Bossuet he knows but does not use; he is in search of erudition, not eloquence. As for his Protestant sources, where English they date from after the Restoration of 1660; where French, Swiss, Dutch or German, they date from after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. They belong overwhelmingly, therefore – and this is true of Catholics as well as Protestants – to a period in which the relations of ecclesiastical to civil

[1] Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1195, for Gibbon's references and allusions to Baronius; *Library*, p. 63. Fleury, 1716, I, pp. 5v, 11b–12; *Mémoires*, I, 'Avertissement' (but cf. Neveu, 1966, pp. 167–8).

authority were undergoing re-examination, complicated by controversies over both the issue of toleration and the status of Nicene theology in a climate, no longer scholastic, where Arminians and Socinians were not the only voices – many would add those of freethinkers and deists – questioning the Trinity and the Incarnation. This is one reason why the period to which Gibbon's sources belong – we have yet said nothing of his own positions – may be termed one of pre-Enlightenment or early Enlightenment.

His Catholic sources, however, do not all engage directly with such questionings, or even pay them much attention. For them the function of historical study – including the critical methods which they regularly practise in meticulous detail – is to reinforce authority by freeing it from the unreliable. Neither in their narratives nor, it is important to add, in the generality of Gibbon's Protestant masters will there be found new materials or new accounts of Christian history; and attempts from the fringes to write non-Christian histories of the primitive Church are little noticed in his writings. In ecclesiastical history, the subject of this volume, we are not to look (the history of Manichaeism is perhaps an exception) for more than the Eusebian narrative and the history of philosophy as we are beginning to see it, re-narrated in ways that reveal the concerns and the methods of the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries. This, Catholic and Protestant, orthodox and sceptical, was the narrative with which Gibbon's historical intellect engaged, and his search for the causes of the spread of Christianity does not mean that he found an alternative to it. Before we can consider how it was that he offended some of his readers as deeply as he did, we must ask whether and in what ways his historical narrative differed from that with which they were familiar; and this cannot be done until we know what the historians on whom he relied had to say.

(II)

Of Gibbon's Catholic sources there is one that outweighs all others, Protestant as well as Catholic, less for the generalised narrative it supplies than as a source of specific information on which Gibbon came to rely. Sebastien Le Nain de Tillemont, a Jansenist cleric of an old *robe* family, withdrew from endangered Port-Royal to his inherited holdings at Tillemont, and carried out two massive historical enterprises that were complete enough to continue publication after he died in 1698.[2] One of these, the *Histoire*

[2] Neveu, 1966.

des empereurs et des autres princes, qui ont regné durant les six premiers siècles de l'eglise, had been used by Gibbon in his chapters leading to the victory of Constantine,[3] but we have now to deal with the even more ambitious *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire ecclésiastique des six premières siécles*, which Gibbon continued to use until the last chapter of his fourth volume, published in 1788.[4] He never ceased making fun of Tillemont for his adherence to Catholic tradition and authority, but never ceased to rely on his scrupulous accuracy in matters of document and fact. This reliance indeed came close to a dependence, as Gibbon did not deny. In his autobiographies he quoted, and thereby endorsed, the judgement of a Göttingen reviewer of the completed *Decline and Fall*: *sine Tillemonto duce*, *saepius noster titubat atque hallucinatur*;[5] and his ambivalence towards the orthodox scholar emerges in a description of Tillemont as 'the sure-footed mule of the Alps [who] may be trusted in the most slippery paths'.[6] The unbelieving historian could not do without his conformist guide; but the conformity of the Jansenist was not quite the same as that of a Gallican or a Jesuit.

Tillemont insists that the *Histoire des empereurs*, though 'n'ayant esté faite que par raport à celle de l'Eglise',[7] is a history in the proper sense; it considers both the actions of the emperors as they affect the Church and 'leurs guerres contre les juifs, les Ecrivains profanes, et les personnes les plus illustres de leurs temps'.[8] The downfall of the Jews, of central importance in Eusebius, is here presented as important to the history of the Church but not part of it, and is not studied in the *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire ecclésiastique*. The persecutions of the Church by the emperors, however, while dealt with in the early volumes of the *Histoire*, were to have been dropped from that series once publication of the *Mémoires* had begun,[9] and in subsequent volumes of the second series they assume an importance which steadily increases until the advent of Constantine. We shall have to consider why it is that the persecutions are events in the history of the Church rather than misfortunes befalling it from outside, but the immediate implication is that there is a history of the Church to which the *Mémoires* contribute, and this must be set against Tillemont's

[3] FDF, pp. 332–8. The six volumes of this *Histoire* began to appear in Paris in 1691. The edition used here is that of Brussels, 1732, cited as '*Empereurs*, 1732'.

[4] Womersley, 1994, III, pp. 1268–9. Cited here as '*Mémoires*', first appearing in Paris in 1693. For Gibbon's farewell to Tillemont see DF, IV, ch. 47, n. 79; Womersley, 1994, II, p. 967.

[5] A, p. 338 n. 62 (Memoir E). [6] DF, II, ch. 25, n. 121; Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1004.

[7] *Mémoires*, I, p. iii. [8] The subtitle of each volume of the *Histoire des empereurs*.

[9] So Tillemont undertakes; *Mémoires*, I, p. iv ('Avertissement'). In the event he did not do so; see below. The relevant volume (v) of the *Histoire* appeared posthumously in 1698; possibly he did not finally revise it.

insistence that the latter are materials *pour servir à* such a history, but not a history in themselves.

L'Auteur aura plus de peine à se justifier dans l'esprit de beaucoup de personnes sur ce qu'il ne donne pas une histoire suivie et continue, comme on a accoutumé de faire, mais diviseé par titres, où l'on ne voit qu'une chose à la fois, sans qu'on sache ce qui se passoit en mesme temps dans le reste de l'Eglise, ou la liaison que les differens evenemens ont les uns avec les autres.

Mais dans la verité l'Auteur n'a suivi cette maniere parceque qu'il l'a trouvée plus facile pour luy, et plus proportionée à son esprit. Il luy a esté beaucoup plus aisé d'examiner un Saint ou une matiere en particulier, et de passer de celle là à une autre, que de s'embarasser à discuter en mesme temps plusieurs faits qui n'avoient point de liaison ensemble, et qui demandoient des vues et des connoissances toutes differentes. Ceux qui voudront de mesme examiner l'histoire à fond, trouveront peutestre aussi qu'ils le feront plus facilement en cette maniere.[10]

[The author will find it harder to justify himself in the eyes of many for not having given a history in continuous sequence, such as one customarily provides, but one divided under headings, in which can be read only one thing at a time, without knowing what was happening in the rest of the Church or how different events were connected with one another.

But in truth the author has written in this manner only because he has found it easier for him and better adapted to his way of thinking. It has been far more satisfactory for him to write of one saint or one episode at a time, and to go on from that to another, than to burden himself with discussing in the same passage several facts unconnected with each other and demanding different perceptions and information. Those who wish nevertheless to examine history in depth will perhaps find that they can do it more easily in this manner.][11]

If, as the translation suggests, *cette maniere* indicates the method Tillemont has adopted rather than that he has declined, he is warning us not to consider him – as Gibbon perhaps did – an antiquarian or *érudit* concerned with facts but not historical understanding; there is an *histoire à fond* which can be reached through the manner of presentation adopted in the *Mémoires*. Tillemont admired, as Gibbon did, the ambitious *Histoire ecclésiastique* of his contemporary Claude Fleury,[12] a Gallican, not Jansenist figure who had been *sous-précepteur* to several royal princes; he sometimes mentioned this work as exemplary of what a history of the Church ought to be. It can therefore be used to supplement and enlarge the narrative of

[10] *Mémoires*, I, pp. iv–v. The reader is reminded that the transcription of *ancien régime* French follows seventeenth-century usage regarding spelling and accentuation. The ampersand is here replaced by 'et'.

[11] Trans. JGAP, as are all in this chapter. An English translation by Thomas Deacon appeared in London in 1733–5.

[12] First published in 1691. I use the Brussels edition of 1716.

pre-Constantinian history that can be perceived *à fond* as the tissue holding together the *saints ou matieres* of which Tillemont's *Mémoires* – Gibbon's principal source – consist.

Fleury supplies, as Tillemont does not, a preface in which he expands his ideas of how an *histoire ecclésiastique* should be written. Its function is to exhibit the continuity and authority of the Church as conveyor of a divine message, and this can be done because the historical narrative is available.

> Le sujet de l'histoire ecclesiastique est de representer la suite du Christianisme, depuis son établissement. Car la veritable religion a cet avantage que l'origine en est certaine, et la tradition suivie jusques à nous, sans aucune interruption. Son origine est certaine, puisqu'il est constant, par la témoignage même des infidelles, que J.C. est venu au monde il y a prés de dix-sept-cens ans. Nous avons entre les mains son histoire écrite par ses disciples témoins oculaires: nous avons les propheties qui l'avoient promis si long-tems auparavant; et nous en savons les dates et les auteurs, à remonter jusques à Moïse, dont les livres sont le plus anciens qui soient au monde.[13]
>
> [The subject of ecclesiastical history is the presentation of Christianity's continuity since its foundation. For the true religion has the advantage that its origin is certain and its tradition follows without interruption to our own day. Its origin is certain because it is agreed, even by infidel witnesses, that Jesus Christ came into the world about seventeen centuries ago. We have in our hands his history, written by his disciples who were ocular witnesses; we have the prophecies which foretold him so long before his coming; and we know their dates and authors back to Moses, whose books are the most ancient there are in the world.]

There is both a *praeparatio evangelica* and an *evangelium*, and both are historically authenticated. No competitor with the Catholic faith can claim as much. We indeed know the dates when heresies were first professed, but we also know when they were condemned and expelled from the Church[14] (and presumably Fleury hopes the same of the heresies flourishing in his own time). We know when Islam began, and it is still in the world; but the Prophet was a man, not a divine being, and did not claim to work miracles.[15] Nor is there any historical case where his religion has survived under alien rule or persecution.[16] Fleury is bringing together the Incarnation (and its *praeparatio*), miracles and martyrdoms; the two latter explained by and witnessing to the first; and ecclesiastical history will consist very largely of narratives of their continuity. But the continuity of the Church is larger than these chronicles, and consists in the continuity of doctrine and authority, of which history is the narrative.

[13] Fleury, 1716, 1, p. 2a. [14] Ibid., 1, p. 4. [15] Ibid., p. 2b. [16] Ibid.

The history of the true religion has been performed in public and recorded openly. The miracles of Moses were enacted before the Egyptians, 'les plus savans et les plus polis de tous les hommes', and recorded by him in the book in which he gave their laws to 'un peuple entier, qu'il a delivré'.[17] The birth, teaching and miracles of Jesus Christ occurred in the 'temps d'Auguste, dans le siècle le plus éclairé de l'empire Romain . . . à Jerusalem qui . . . était la capitale' of Judea; they are documented by Hebrew prophecies and one part of a Roman history we know better than we do the early history of France.

C'est à la face de toutes les nations: des Grecs, des barbares, des savans, des ignorans, des Juifs, des Romains, des peuples et des princes; que les disciples de J.C. ont rendu temoignage des merveilles qu'ils avoient veües de leurs yeux, oüies de leurs oreilles, et touchées de leurs mains; et particulierement de sa resurrection. Ils ont soutenue ce temoignage sans aucun interest, et contre toutes les raisons de la prudence humaine, jusque au dernier soupir, et l'ont tous scelé de leur sang. Voilà l'établissement du Christianisme.

Qu'est-il arrivé depuis? Cette doctrine incroyable, cette morale si contraire aux passions des hommes, ont-elles pû se soutenir? N'y a-t-il point quelque vuide, quelque interruption? Par où en avons nous la connoissance? Par une succession suivie des docteurs et de disciples; par des écrits publiés d'âge en âge et conservés de main en main, par des traditions qui ont passé des peres aux enfans: par des assemblées solemnelles en chaque Province et en chaque ville, par l'exercice de cette religion, et par les bastimens destinés à ces usages, dont quelques-uns subsistent depuis mille ans: tout cela sans aucune interruption . . . depuis S. Pierre et S. Paul ont fondé l'eglise Romaine, il y a toujours eu à Rome un pape chef des Chrétiens: nous en savons toute la suite et tous les noms jusqu'à Innocent XII.[18]

[It was before the face of all nations, Greek and barbarian, learned and ignorant, Jewish and Roman, peoples and princes, that the disciples of Jesus Christ bore witness to the wonders they had seen with their eyes, heard with their ears, and touched with their hands; above all to his resurrection. They maintained this testimony without interest, and contrary to all considerations of human prudence, even to their last breaths, and they all sealed it with their blood.[19] Here is the foundation of Christianity.

What has come to pass since then? This doctrine so hard to believe, this morality so contrary to human passions; have they sustained themselves? Has there been no breach, no interruption? From where do we derive our knowledge of it? From a continuous succession of doctors and their disciples; from scriptures published from age to age and preserved from hand to hand; from traditions passed from father to child; from solemn assemblies in every province and city; from the

[17] Ibid., I, pp. 3–3v. [18] Ibid., I, p. 3v.

[19] This seems to imply – perhaps to necessitate – the martyrdoms of the Apostles themselves. Only those of James, Peter and Paul were authoritatively recorded.

continual exercise of this religion; and from buildings dedicated to these uses, of which some have stood for a thousand years; all this without interruption . . . Since Peter and Paul founded the Church of Rome, there has always been at Rome a pope who is head of the Christians; we know their succession and their names, down to Innocent the Twelfth.]

Sixteen centuries and more after Eusebius, the Church's continuity in time has been greatly extended and, in face of the Protestant challenge, has become more forward in vindicating its authority; but this extension of the *moyenne durée* has not changed the formulation of its nature. That is to say, Fleury is not invoking the number of centuries for which it has existed, or offering its duration as a probabilistic argument for accepting its authority. Extension is less important to him than continuity; it is the assertion that there has been no breach – and, he is adding, no change – in the Church's continuous existence that constitutes a statement of its authority, or rather, a statement that it is uttering the same Word that was made Flesh in the beginning. History is the record of the continuous utterance of this Word, of the continued human institution that exists to speak it, and – as an afterthought – of the changing worldly or human circumstances in which it has been spoken. Some of these circumstances are integral to the story; the persecutions exist to provide martyrs, who by their deaths continue speaking the Word triumphantly – this is why it is significant that Islam has not undergone persecutions – but too much interest in historical contingency is to be discouraged. That way lies the sin of curiosity, the employment of intellect on matters indifferent to salvation, which may end in presenting the incarnate Word itself as the creature of circumstance, contingency and context; it is this, in the last analysis, that Gibbon's critics have thought, or perceived, that he was doing. But how far could ecclesiastical history be confined to the continuity of the Word's utterance? There were points at which it might be challenged and must be re-affirmed; points at which it seemed to have been invaded by histories alien to its purpose. Both Fleury and Tillemont, like Eusebius before them, had to give accounts of how ecclesiastical history was to be written and what it was to include.

Fleury did not find it necessary to begin his history with a narrative of the life of Jesus Christ; we knew nothing, he said, which was not in the Gospels, and there was no need to know more.[20] It was otherwise with the lives of the Apostles; what was in the Acts could be enlarged by drawing on the Epistles; and it was possible to learn from the non-Christian authors,

[20] Fleury, 1716, I, p. 20.

Philo and Josephus – the latter particularly, since he gave us an account of the downfall of the Jews. Tillemont on the other hand – who was not writing a history – presented a full, strictly scriptural, narrative of Jesus's life, followed by those of Mary, Joseph, Joseph of Arimathea and John the Baptist, before proceeding to the Apostles.[21] Because he had chosen to write *mémoires*, he was not constrained by the need to present a master narrative – though he never questioned the authority of the history of the Word – and there were scholarly problems in stating the life of Jesus, which needed to be cleared up. The lesser figures who followed presented problems in relating the canon to traditions not included in it. It was needless curiosity, for example, to enquire too closely into the identity of Mary's parents; the tradition naming them Joachim and Anne might be respected and did not require verification.[22] The belief in some quarters that the Baptist, as Christ's predecessor, must have been the greatest of all men was not necessary and should be treated with caution.[23] As the sequence of *mémoires* proceeded to the lives of the Apostles, however, it assumed a narrative structure, and what was being narrated was nothing less than the formation of both Scripture and tradition. Just how was the life of Christ and its tremendous meaning known to us? How had it been transmitted? What were the relations between ocular witness, oral transmission and the written word? By what means had certain writings been accepted into the canon, and what judgements had been formed concerning the various standings of those which had not? Here historical decisions had to be made, and histories had to be written. Fleury had noticed this and added a significant quotation. Remarking that the Apostles and their disciples had for the most part written nothing and were probably illiterate, he had continued:

> S. Clement Alexandrin si proche de leur temps en rend ce témoignage remarquable: Les anciens n'écrivoient point, pour ne se pas détourner du soin d'enseigner, ni employer à écrire le temps de mediter ce qu'ils devoient dire. Peut-être aussi ne croyoient-ils pas que le même naturel pût réussir en l'un et en l'autre genre. Car la parole coule facilement et enleve promptement l'auditeur; mais l'écrit est exposé a l'examen rigoureux des lecteurs. L'écrit sert à assurer la doctrine, faisant passer à la posterité la tradition des anciens: mais comme de plusiers matieres l'aiman

[21] 'Tome premier, qui contient le temps de nostre Seigneur et les Apostres' is the subtitle of *Mémoires*, I; the first chapters are headed 'Histoire Abregée de la Naissance, de la Vie, de la Passion, et de la Resurrection de Nostre Seigneur JESUS CHRIST'.

[22] *Mémoires*, I, pp. 60–1. Mary at Bethlehem says nothing to the shepherds 'pour . . . observer les regles de S. Paul sans les avoir apprises de luy' (p. 5). It is the virtue of women to be silent.

[23] Ibid., I, p. 87.

n'attire que la fer: ainsi de plusieurs lecteurs les livres n'attirent que ceux qui sont capables de les entendre. Ce sont les paroles de S. Clement.[24]

[St Clement of Alexandria, who lived so close to their time, gives this remarkable testimony: the ancients did not write, so as not to turn away from the task of teaching, or employ in writing the time to consider what they should say. Perhaps also, they did not believe that the same abilities could succeed in both genres; for the spoken word flows easily and instantly captivates the hearer, while the written is exposed to the rigorous scrutiny of readers. Writing serves to ensure doctrine, communicating to posterity the tradition of the ancients; but as of several substances the magnet attracts only iron, so of several readers, books attract only those able to understand them. These are the words of St Clement.]

More even than Clement, Fleury lived in a scribal and now typographic culture, where texts were exposed to criticism and it was doubted whether oral tradition could transmit information to more than one generation. He would know that there were those, like Bayle and later Toland, who employed textual criticism to reduce even sacred texts to conveying the information critics could accept. Both Clement and Fleury, however, held that the function of the word was to create faith in the mind of the hearer or reader; the mind encountered the word (or Word) and was remade by it. This was the point which they, and Tillemont, referred to the message which they found in the Epistle to the Corinthians – a written text recording the effect of oral preaching – that the 'foolishness' of the communicated Word overcame the wisdom of Jewish law and Greek philosophy; being the Word of the incarnate Logos, it was a communication of the incarnate Word itself, and its function was conversion and rebirth. To narrate how the spoken Word became the written, and to insist that the writers acted under direct inspiration, was essential to the history of Word and Church at which both Tillemont and Fleury aimed; but this was now a history of apostles, disciples, evangelists and their texts, acting at moments in a history canonical Scripture did not fully record. The Gospels did not narrate their own reduction to writing; the Epistles did not do so wholly; and there were traditions and other writings outside the canon, which had to be admitted to the narrative.

The narrative now became apostolic and post-apostolic, complicated by the selectivity of evidence concerning the former. Of the Evangelists, Matthew and John were Apostles, Mark and Luke the disciples of Peter and Paul. Though the authority of Matthew's text was not questioned, the absence of his supposed Hebrew original made him a shadowy actor in this history; and the role of John, whose Gospel was unlike the others,

[24] Fleury, 1716, 1, pp. 4b–5a.

was deferred until later in the narrative and to special circumstances. He was, furthermore, one of the four Apostles – the others being Peter, James and Paul – of whom alone the book of Acts has much to say, the remaining figures other than Judas having disappeared into increasingly shadowy traditions; and there is a history built around these four, based upon Acts but by no means confined to it. James, first bishop of Jerusalem, is a figure in the narrative of the downfall of the Jews – his martyrdom at their hands continuing their guilt of deicide – and in the more enduringly momentous extension of the Christian mission to the Gentiles, that is the Greeks, who come increasingly to dominate it. We have just noticed a central consequence of this step in the language of an Epistle ascribed to Paul, where the Christian Word confronts Jews and Greeks together; and it is the encounter with Greek philosophy which will come to dominate its subsequent history through seventeen centuries. Paul, even more than Peter, is the Apostle to the Gentiles – Peter's primacy is expressed at Rome, not Athens or Antioch – and he remains a transforming yet anomalous figure among the Apostles. Where they were called by Christ in his life on earth, he was called by the risen and ascended Christ, and there are interesting asides in which Tillemont suggests that first one and then the other calling gave an 'avantage' over the other[25] – opening up possible Christological speculations from which Tillemont wisely abstained.

Paul is a teacher of doctrine in his Epistles, not in any Gospel, though Luke is accounted his disciple as Mark was Peter's; both write in Greek (of a kind) for Gentiles, as does John in the Fourth Gospel after them. To follow the sequence of the Evangelists, we go, as we did with Eusebius, beyond the canonical Acts into a history that relies on tradition and occasionally on profane historians, Josephus or Tacitus. It takes place in a double context, in the first place that of persecution. Peter and Paul are martyred at Rome, in the persecution by Nero, which, close in time to the destruction of Jerusalem, marks the end of persecution by Jews and the beginnings of persecution by Roman authority and Hellenist culture;[26] a story of much historiographic complexity. To make our way to the Gospel of John, which we already know to be centrally important, we must add to the context of persecution a further context, at first sight incidental to the history of the Word and not arising from it: the context of primarily gnostic heresy.

There recurs in both French historians the story, derived through Eusebius from Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, in which the Simon Magus of Acts is enlarged from simoniac to heresiarch; the companion of Helena

[25] *Mémoires*, I, pp. 212, 221.
[26] Ibid., II, pp. 77–9, for Nero's as the first persecution properly so called.

and founder of gnosticism.[27] We learn no more than we know already about the origins of this tale, and the intrusion of heresy remains a major accretion to the history of unbroken continuity common to Eusebius and Fleury. It remains perplexing as well, since though Christian and Enlightened authors laboured to present gnostics as Christian heretics, whose creed began as a false statement regarding the nature of Christ, this does not satisfactorily account for the dualist gnostic assertion that the Creation was the work of an inferior power and that Christ came to free us from him. Nor is this easily explained by the now fashionable belief that every heresy is the invention of an orthodoxy seeking to provide itself with an other. We ask the ecclesiastical historians for some recognition that Christianity here encountered an alien belief system, but we do not seem to find it. The narrative moves on to Mark writing his Gospel to preserve the spoken teachings of Peter against Simon Magus at Rome,[28] and to the more momentous creation of the Fourth Gospel, written by the Apostle John nearing his hundredth year at Ephesus, to confute the heretic Cerinthus, who had managed to conflate the Ebionite doctrine that Jesus was simply a man (and that Christian converts should be circumcised) with the Docetic or gnostic doctrine that Christ was a divine being who had descended upon Jesus at his baptism and departed from him at his crucifixion.[29] Tillemont mentions the tradition that the aged John once fled from a bath-house for fear it might fall while Cerinthus was in it, and wonders what the Apostle, a holy man noted for his austerities, was doing in a bath-house in the first place.[30] Gibbon must have known this passage, and only a determination to avoid apostolic history can account for his failure to make use of it.

The Fourth Gospel is a source for all statements that the Word has been made Flesh and dwelt among us, and the *praeparatio evangelica* offers to provide the Word with its prehistory. There could now develop debate as to how far the Word was the Greek Logos, and how far the Hebrew 'Word of the Lord', and we move towards a point where nearly all heresies appeared as mis-statements of the Johannine formula. Most authorities mention the heretical Alogoi, who repudiated the Word so vehemently that they held this Gospel to be the work of Cerinthus, who had passed it off as John's.[31] Tillemont says that the three earlier Gospels had witnessed to the doings and sayings of Jesus in his life – not omitting his birth,

[27] Ibid., II, pp. 37–44; Fleury, 1716, I, pp. 14–16.
[28] *Mémoires*, II, p. 98; for Matthew's Gospel, I, pp. 387–90.
[29] 'L'Heresie des Gnostiques', *Mémoires*, II, p. 52–8; 'L'Heresie des Cerinthiens', pp. 58–64.
[30] *Mémoires*, I, p. 357: 'soit par l'inspiration de l'Esprit de Dieu, soit qu'il y fust constraint par quelque incommodité'.
[31] Ibid., I, p. 499.

death, resurrection and ascension – while it had been reserved for John to recount their spiritual meaning.[32] It would not do to present this as an esoteric knowledge, reserved until the proper time; and the advent of heresy, moving John to write, is important in shaping the movement from oral tradition to Scripture, which could never be quite complete.

Fleury makes a move from which Tillemont partly holds back, injecting into the story, immediately after Simon Magus, one Apollonius of Tyana of whom Eusebius had written apart from his history. In Fleury's, he is paired with Simon as the devil's emissary, but he is not a pretended Christian or a heresiarch, and it is presumably for this reason that Tillemont virtually excludes him from the *Mémoires*, and mentions him only cursorily in the *Histoire des empereurs*.[33] The latter is a history of non-Christian activities as they affect the Church; the pagan Apollonius does not act within church history. Where Simon was a magician and heresiarch, Apollonius was a philosopher and magician. Like Gibbon, the authors ancient and modern are interested in how easily one could be both the latter; but Apollonius is, precisely on these grounds, an ambivalent figure in the long confrontation between the incarnate Word and Greek philosophy.[34] He claims only to be a man of unusual powers, he acts in the human world, and many of his wonders can be explained as intelligent divination. For this reason he acts in Fleury's *Histoire* at several points in time,[35] but is set outside Tillemont's history while acting upon it. The literary tradition made him a recurrent figure in Christian history, but as he was no systematic philosopher he could not be a central one.

(III)

Tillemont's *Mémoires* are of course materials for the history of the Church, and do not offer a narrative of that history.[36] They consist of notices and

[32] Ibid., I, pp. 365–7.

[33] Ibid., V, pp. 48–9, deal with Hierocles's attempt to set Apollonius in opposition to Jesus as a move in Diocletian's persecution, and with Eusebius's reply; Apollonius is 'un miserable magicien'. *Empereurs*, 1732, III, p. 210, mentions Aurelian's building a temple to him at Tyana.

[34] A significant but secondary history could be written of this figure's career in ancient and early modern literature. His doings as a wonder-worker in the reign of Domitian had been recounted in a work of fiction by Philostratus and revived in a later form by Sossianus Hierocles, who believed that they might be used to counter the miracles of Christ and reduce the latter to the same stature. Eusebius had written a refutation of Hierocles. In 1680 Charles Blount had written a life of Apollonius suspected of sharing the intentions of the same work, and it is to this possibility that Gibbon once scandalously alludes (FDF, p. 472). In other writings, however, e.g. de Guignes (BSE, p. 131), Apollonius moves from thaumaturge to Pythagorean philosopher. He is a recurrent figure in both roles throughout early Enlightened debate.

[35] Fleury, 1716, I, pp. 16–18, 94–8, II, 169–72, 188–9, 241–6, 252–3, 256.

[36] *Mémoires*, I, pp. vi, vii–viii, xi (allusion to Fleury).

essays, enormously variable in length, which may be distributed under the following heads: lives of apostles, saints, doctors and increasingly martyrs, again of varying lengths; heresies; and persecutions. The first category is numerically dominant and does most to determine the form of the work, notably in the pre-Constantinian volumes. Its contents are listed in an order shaped by calendrical and liturgical considerations, observing neither chronological precision nor historical sequence.[37] Thus the Evangelists Matthew, Mark and Luke appear after the detailed study of the Apostle John – Matthew was also an Apostle – has told us that his Fourth Gospel was the last to be written and is of another character than theirs. This is supposed not to raise problems for the reader – if the *Mémoires* are to be read consecutively and not simply consulted as a work of reference – since the reader does not expect a sequential history. Fleury observes a different order, and the four Gospels appear in chronological sequence;[38] but it is in some ways more useful to observe how considerations that we class as historical make their way into the *Mémoires* as Tillemont pursues an order that does not oblige him to look for them. We shall find that he was in no way unable to recognise them as they appeared and challenged him.

There is a 'secular' history of the Gospels, if by 'secular' we may mean the recognition that they were written by identified authors in specified circumstances. It is of course affirmed that all four were inspired, inerrant and consistent with each other, but the grand emblematic systems of ox, lion, man and eagle do not appear in the writings before us. It is recognised that there is a history of the conversion into writing of apostolic testimony – direct in Matthew and John, relayed by disciples in Mark and Luke – previously conveyed orally, and that this happened for particular reasons. Matthew wrote, in Hebrew where his successors used Greek,[39] for Jewish converts to Christianity; Mark to relay Peter's preachings against Simon Magus; Luke to convey what he had learned from Paul (who had not witnessed the life of Jesus); John to affirm Christ's divinity against Cerinthus. The problem of transition from the spoken to the written word became the larger matter of the Gentilisation and Hellenisation of the Christian evangel. All four Gospels – Matthew's original supposed

[37] Ibid., I, pp. iv–v, vi ('l'ordre et la disposition où on a mis les titres formast une espece d'histoire'). See above, p. 49.

[38] Fleury, 1716, I, pp. 44 (Matthew), 48 (Mark), 69 (Luke), 256–7 (John; a notably brief account, following that of his Apocalypse and Epistles, 246–9; the Epistles are again considered after his Gospel).

[39] *Mémoires*, I, pp. 388–9 ('Il s'est arresté à décrire la generation temporelle de JESUS CHRIST, laissant à S. Jean le soin d'achever ce qu'il avoit commencé, et de découvrir sa naissance eternelle aux plus avancez'). Fleury, 1716, I, p. 44, thinks he wrote in a Syrian dialect.

to have disappeared – existed only in Greek, and the Acts, Epistles and (presenting problems of its own) the Apocalypse had been first written in that language. Fleury and Tillemont alike concern themselves with the quality of New Testament Greek in a way which may strike us as post-humanist and culturally snobbish, recalling Gibbon's remark that in youth he had rejected study of St John's Gospel as 'the corrupt dialect of the Hellenist Jews'.[40] There is more to it than that; with the written canon we begin the journey away from the illiterate Apostles of Galilee. Paul is perhaps crucial; it could be held that he was called to the apostolate because the Mission to the Gentiles required one skilled in both rabbinical and Hellenic literature; but at this point cultural norms assert themselves. His preaching on the Areopagus confronts Athenian philosophy with the Christian Word, the dialogue which will dominate the whole subsequent course of Christian intellectual history; and it becomes necessary that the evangel be written in a Greek persuasive to hearers and readers. The fact remains, however, that the first account of this encounter states that the 'foolishness' of the Word confounds both Greek philosophy and Jewish legalism, so that the philosophically persuasive must subvert philosophy itself. This is the key to much that is to follow, and it is why we find Fleury – who knew that many Jews were Greek-speaking in the time of Christ[41] – remarking of Paul:

> Ainsi son grec n'est pas pur: souvent le tour de la phrase est hebraïque; souvent il néglige la construction du discours: il commence plus periodes sans les achever. La suite est princípalement dans les pensées. C'est qu'il parloit du cœur, et dictoit rapidement, suivant l'impetuosité de l'esprit de Dieu: la lumiere abondante, dont il estoit plein, ne cherchoit qu'à sortir, et à se répandre au dehors. Tant de verités qui lui étoient toujours présentes, et qu'il voyoient extrémement simples et unies entr'elles, le pressoient de tout dire à la fois, et à toute occasion. Delà viennent tant de parentheses et de digressions dans ses epîtres: tant d'hyperbates et de transpositions; qui rendent son stile difficile. D'ailleurs il vivoit dans une extréme pauvreté, et tout son exterieur étoit humble et simple. Tout cela la rendoit méprisable aux Grecs, qui n'étoient pas encore bien guéris de la vaine curiosité.[42]

> [So his Greek is not pure; the idiom is often Hebraic; he often neglects construction and begins more periods than he can complete. The sequence is rather that of his thoughts. It is because he is speaking from the heart and dictating rapidly, following the impetuosity of the Spirit of God. The abundant light by which he was filled sought only to break out and spread itself abroad. All the truths which were ever before him, and seemed to him extremely simple and united with each other,

[40] A, p. 141 (Memoir B). See also *Journal A*, p. 6.
[41] Fleury, 1716, I, pp. 10–11.
[42] Ibid., I, pp. 80–1.

pressed him to say everything at once and on every occasion. Hence arose all the parentheses and digressions in his Epistles, all the inversions and transpositions which make his style difficult. In addition, he lived in extreme poverty, and his outward appearance was humble and simple. All this rendered him contemptible to the Greeks, who were not yet cured of their vain curiosity.]

Criticism has become history and diagnosis. An unbeliever could read this passage as the portrait of an enthusiast, an ignorant prophet possessed by his own uncomprehended speech, but Fleury does mean us to see Paul's incoherence as the 'foolishness' of the Word. It should not last, however, and we find Tillemont remarking of the Johannine Gospel, in which Christ's nature is finally made clear, that the clarity of its language equals that of its doctrine.

S. Denys d'Alexandrie fait cet éloge du style tant de l'Evangile que de la premier epistre de S. Jean. 'Ces deux ouvrages, dit-il, non seulement suivent avec exactitude les regles de la langue gre[c]que, mais ils sont mesme écrits avec beaucoup d'élegance, soit pour les termes, soit pour les raisonnemens, soit par la construction. On n'y trouve rien de barbare et d'impropre, ni mesme de bas et de vulgaire: de sorte qu'il paroist, ajoute S. Denys, que Dieu luy avoit donné non seulement la lumiere et la connoissance des choses, mais aussi le grace de bien exprimer ce qu'il connoissoit.' Cette élegance est jointe dans S. Jean avec une grande simplicité de style. Il repete souvent les mesmes termes, ce que les savans remarquent qu'il avoit tiré du Syriaque, aussibien que quelques autres choses que l'on remarque dans son style. Et ces repetitions sont souvent assez agreables.[43]

[St Dionysius of Alexandria has this praise of the style of both St John's Gospel and his first Epistle. 'Those two works', he says, 'not only follow exactly the rules of the Greek language, but are written with real elegance, whether in the terms, in the argument or in the constructions. There is nothing barbarous or improper, low or vulgar; so that it would seem', adds St Dionysius, 'that God had bestowed on him not only the knowledge and understanding of divine things, but the gift of expressing well that which he knew.' This elegance is joined in St John's writings with a great simplicity of style. He often repeats the same words, which the learned observe that he had drawn from the Syriac, together with other features to be found in his style. And those repetitions are often pleasing to the reader.]

It was almost by a gift of tongues from the Holy Ghost that this Apostle – scripturally an unlearned fisherman from Galilee – had acquired a Greek so pure that it was acceptable even to the philosophers whom it challenged.[44] It was a central fact of late antique history that the Christian gospel had entered into dialogue with Greek philosophy and rhetoric, without which it might have been hard to say that the Logos had been made Flesh.

[43] *Mémoires*, I, p. 367. [44] For the Greek style of Luke's Gospel, see ibid., II, pp. 142, 147.

It is of no small significance that what Fleury had been saying of Paul had also been said in antiquity of the neo-Platonist and anti-Christian philosopher Plotinus, who according to his biographer Porphyry wrote carelessly, would not revise his writings and cared only for the thought he was trying to express. This indifference to the niceties of written speech was a product of inspiration, and could be described by such words as *enthuseōn* and *enthusiasmos*.[45] The foolishness of the word might be Hellenic in origin, and have no need of a Hebraic admixture; but Tillemont has declared the writings of John rhetorically correct, to ensure the return of inspiration to philosophic clarity.

A narrative entailing both sacred and secular history may be found, occasionally or subtextually stated, as we work through the text of Tillemont's *Mémoires*. A key theme here is the relation between evangel and philosophy, in which we already know that Justin Martyr is to be a central figure. We arrive at him through a series of *mémoires*, devoted to apostles, disciples and other leading personalities, but also to two further key themes: heresy and persecution. It is a consequence of the latter that the saints who dominate Tillemont's selection of *mémoires* are increasingly martyrs. Of the two, heresy – while recurrent and refuted in detail – is perhaps the nearer to being accidental; it is inspired by *le demon* (a figure often but not very specifically mentioned), whereas persecution is not merely permitted by God but willed by him as his instrument.

Dieu qui a tout fait pour l'établissement et pour la perfection de son Eglise, a voulu qu'elle ait esté agitée durant prés de trois siecles par des persecutions presque continuelles, afin de l'affermir par le efforts mesmes que les hommes faisoit pour la ruiner. Car rien n'estoit plus propre à établir les fideles dans le mépris de toutes les choses de la terre et dans le desir de celles du ciel, ce qui est le but et le fin du Christianisme, que le danger où ils se voyaient sans cesse de perdre tout qu'on peut aimer dans la vie, et la vie mesme. Et rien ne pouvoit mieux faire voir à tous ceux qui ne vouloient pas s'aveugler eux mesmes, que nostre religion n'estoit point d'ouvrage des hommes, mais de la toutepuissance de Dieu, que de voir toute la terre armée contr'elle durant trois cents ans sans la pouvoir vaincre.[46]

[God, who has done all things for the establishment and perfection of his Church, willed that it should be assailed for the space of three hundred years by almost continual persecutions, to the end that it be strengthened by the very means which men took to destroy it. For nothing was more fitted to confirm the faithful in the scorn of all things worldly and the desire of those of heaven, which is the

[45] I draw this from Grafton and Williams, 2006, pp. 32 and 299. My thanks to Orest Ranum for this reference.

[46] *Mémoires*, II, p. 77.

aim and purpose of Christianity, than the danger in which they perpetually found themselves of losing all that is loved in life and even life itself. And nothing can more clearly display, to all who do not wish to blind themselves, that our religion is not the work of men but of God's almighty power, than to see all the world armed against it for three hundred years, yet unable to defeat it.]

Gibbon had used, but then cancelled, language not unlike this in the *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*.[47] Its point here is that persecution is necessary to the Church, a necessary stage in its combat with the world; there are moments at which Tillemont seems to fear for the Church should persecution at any time cease, as after Constantine it did. It is the work of the world and the flesh, rather than the devil; almost an effect of the world's virtues and their insufficiency; which is why persecution by Jews, mistaken actors in sacred history, is of another significance than persecutions by Romans.

On met pour la premiere celle de Neron, non que l'Eglise n'en eust déja souffert plusieurs autres, mais parceque Neron employa le premier l'espée imperiale contre les Chrétiens.[48]

[Nero's is held to be the first persecution, not because the Church had not already suffered others, but because Nero was the first to employ the imperial sword against the Christians.]

Nero, and Domitian after him, were accounted tyrants; but it was necessary to the argument as Tillemont saw it that persecution should be the work of secular power when this was exercised for good as this world understood it, and even by rulers who were good and intended good. It followed that persecution, willed by God in sacred history, could be understood as the effect of secular causes. There is much about the corruption of manners under the empire, which caused the Christians to be suspected of crimes they had not committed and hated for the virtues they really displayed; but it is when we come to Trajan and his much quoted correspondence with Pliny that Tillemont confronts the problem of persecution by the well-intentioned, acting out of causes situated within their culture. After listing 'la pureté de sa morale directement opposé à la corruption des payens', 'l'amour que les hommes ont ordinairement pour toutes leurs anciennes coutumes . . . cette veritable manie', and the activity of 'les demons'[49] (mentioned for once in the plural), he goes on:

Il ne faut pas donc s'étonner de tant de persecutions que l'Eglise a souffertes durant trois cens ans: Et on le trouvera encore moins étrange, quand on saura que cette aversion generale que l'on avoit pour la verité, estoit soutenue par l'autorité des

[47] EEG, p. 212. [48] *Mémoires*, II, p. 79. [49] Ibid., II, p. 182.

loix . . . l'une des plus anciennes loix de l'Empire Romain, défendoit absolument de reconnoitre aucun dieu qui n'eust pas esté approuvé par le Senat. Et comme JESUS CHRIST n'avoit point esté receu par cette autorité, il n'estoit point besoin de nouvelles loix pour exposer ses adorateurs à toutes les insultes et à toutes les violences de leurs ennemis . . . Il arrivoit encore assez souvent que sans qu'il y eust aucune nouvelle loy contre les Chrétiens, les peuples demandoient publiquement dans les amphitheatres qu'ils fussent tous exterminez; et que sans attendre aucun ordre des magistrats, ils employoient contr'eux les pierres et le feu.[50]

[It is then not to be wondered at that the Church suffered so many persecutions during these three centuries; and it will seem still less strange when we realise that this general aversion to the truth was upheld by the authority of the laws . . . One of the most ancient laws of the empire categorically forbade the acknowledgement of any god who had not been approved by the Senate; and since Jesus Christ lacked this authorisation, there was no need of new laws to expose his worshippers to all the insults and violence of their enemies . . . It often happened therefore that without the enactment of any new law against the Christians, the populace demanded their extermination in the public assemblies, and without any command from the magistrates attacked them with stones and fire,]

extending even to the desecration of their graves (Tillemont says Jews were particularly active in this). Trajan and Pliny – who disliked private associations anyway – faced what was essentially a police problem. The Christians were in disobedience to the laws, and disturbed the peace by making themselves the targets of mob action. Hence the paradoxical solution Trajan ordained: Christians were not to be sought out and denunciations were to be discouraged, but if brought before the magistrate they were to be threatened with penalties, not to make them confess to punishable crimes but to make them escape punishment by denying their religion. Tillemont mentions Tertullian's exposure of these inconsistencies, without saying that it had become part of the rhetoric of toleration in his own time.[51]

Persecution at this stage was sporadic, and as much the state's response to popular disorder as the imposition of its authority on dissentients. We enter a new phase when the ruling structure acquires its own motives for seeking to outlaw Christianity, as it increasingly does down to and through the great persecutions under Diocletian and the tetrarchs. Trajan and Pliny are, as Gibbon will argue, conducting a persecution by the tolerant, but the scene changes under Marcus Aurelius, where Tillemont discovers an explicit relationship between persecution and philosophy.

Il semble qu'elle ait pu venir en partie des philosophes, trop puissans sous un prince qui s'appliquoit tout entier à étudier et à pratiquer les regles morales de la philosophie.

[50] Ibid., II, pp. 182–3. [51] Ibid., II, p. 191.

. . . animaux de gloire et d'orgueil, voyant toute leur morale effacée par la vertu solide de tant de Chrétiens, et toute leur suffisance dissipée par les sectateurs d'un crucifié, et par des gens qu'ils traitoient d'inconnus et d'ignorans.[52]

[It may have come in part from the philosophers, over-powerful under a prince altogether devoted to the study and practice of the moral laws of philosophy.

. . . creatures of pride and the thirst for glory, who saw their morality eclipsed by the solid virtue of so many Christians, and their self-sufficiency annulled by the followers of a crucified man and by people they considered obscure and ignorant.]

We have reached an important moment in the history of philosophy, which can now be attacked as insufficient in the name of supernatural grace (of especial significance to the Jansenist Tillemont). The next crucial actor in the story is Justin Martyr, the entry on whom is sixty-two pages long, and was, says Tillemont, written before the body of the work and is rather an *éloge* than a *mémoire*.[53] Justin, we have already seen, plays a number of roles in the making of the Christian narrative. Together with Irenaeus, he is a principal (perhaps the earliest) author of the derivation of gnosticism from Simon Magus and Menander; but the gnostic heresiarchs are magicians claiming to be philosophers, and in some measure cultural aliens, whereas the philosophers at the centre of Justin's narrative may sometimes be magicians, but are situated at the heart of the Hellenic culture into which the Church expanded as it pursued the Mission to the Gentiles. Justin, who wore the cloak of a philosopher after he became a Christian, tells us that he studied (like the legendary Apollonius) the various schools of Athenian philosophy, but was disappointed by Stoics, Peripatetics and Pythagoreans in that order, until Platonism brought him to the point beyond which he went in accepting Christ. As Tillemont presents his language:

l'intelligence de ces estres incorporels me ravissoit; et la contemplation de ces idées me donnoit comme des ailes pour m'élever au dessus de moy. Je m'imaginois déja estre devenu sage en peu de temps, et j'estoit assez peu raisonnable pour esperer de voir Dieu dans un moment. Car c'est le but que la philosophie Platonicienne se propose.[54]

[The knowledge of incorporeal beings carried me away, and the contemplation of ideas gave me what seemed wings on which I rose above myself. I fancied I had become a sage in a little time, and I was so far beyond reason that I hoped to see God immediately. This is the end proposed for itself by the Platonic philosophy.]

[52] Ibid., II, pp. 336–8. [53] Ibid., II, pp. 377–439. [54] Ibid., pp. 382–3.

But God as idea eludes Justin, though he does not give up the hope of apprehending him. At this point he encounters the aged man, who invites him to believe that the divine idea has been born as a man. This transforms his understanding of the term 'philosophy'; the knowledge of God becomes on the one hand an acceptance of grace and a conversion experience, while on the other it entails a narrative of sacred history.

S. Justin sentit aussitost (ce sont ses termes) s'allumer un feu dans son ame, qui l'embraza d'amour pour les Prophetes, pour ces grands hommes qui sont les amis de JESUS CHRIST; et pour dire tout en un mot, à force de repasser en son esprit, et de ruminer ce qui ce vieillard luy avoit dit, il trouva que cette philosophie estoit seule veritable, et seule utile. C'est ainsi, ajoute-t-il en s'addressant à Tryphon –

Justin's conversion narrative is contained in his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*[55] –

que je suis devenu philosophe; voilà le sujet qui m'y a porté. Cette philosophie dont il parle, est certainement la Chrétienne; et les moqueries insolentes de tous les Juifs qui l'ecoutoient, font bien voir qu'ils ne l'entendoient point autrement. Ainsi nous ne pouvons douter que le discours du vieillard n'ait esté la veritable cause de sa conversion. Cependant il ne luy avoit parlé que de Dieu, des Prophetes, et d'un Messie en general, et mesme fort obscurement; ce qui les Juifs croyoient aussibien que les Chrétiens; sans luy dire en seul mot, que nous sachions, ni de Jesus, ni de l'adoration d'un Dieu incarné et crucifié.[56] Ce qui nous oblige de dire que Dieu se contentoit pour lors de la délivrer de l'attache qu'il avoit aux philosophes payens, et de mettre dans le chemin de la verité, en luy inspirant l'amour des Prophetes et de la parole divine. Il reservoit l'accomplissement de cette œuvre aux diverses graces qu'il voulut luy donner ensuite, qui neanmoins sont toutes de cette premiere, comme de leur source.[57]

[St Justin at once felt (such are his words) a fire blaze up in his soul, which now burned with love for the prophets, those great men who were the friends of Jesus Christ; in a word, by ruminating and revolving in his mind what the aged man had said to him, he found that this philosophy alone was true and profitable. 'It was thus', he adds, addressing himself to Trypho, 'that I became a philosopher; this was the matter that brought me to it.' The philosophy of which he speaks is certainly Christianity; the derisive jests of his Jewish hearers leave no doubt that this is how they understood him. We cannot then doubt that the words of the aged man were the true course of his conversion. Nevertheless, the former spoke to him only of God, his prophets and a Messiah, in general terms and with some obscurity; doctrines which Jews believed no less than Christians; and said not one word, as far as we know, of Jesus or of the worship of a God incarnate and

[55] For a recent study of this work, see Allert, 2002.
[56] The allusion is to the words of the aged man, not to Justin's expansion of them.
[57] *Mémoires*, II, p. 386.

crucified. We are obliged to conclude that God was content for a time to deliver Justin from his attachment to the heathen philosophers, and to set him on the road to truth by inspiring him with love for the prophets and the Word of God. The accomplishment of this work was reserved for the gifts of grace bestowed on him at a later time, all of them arising from the first as their source.]

Justin has been posing a cultural enigma to Tillemont and his readers. His essential quarrel is with Greek philosophy, which has taken him almost where he wants to go, but has then deserted him. He turns to Jewish thought, but only to the prophets – though he makes the Jewish interlocutors in his dialogue refugees from the Bar Kochba war, engaged in the study of Platonism.[58] He does not seem, at least to Tillemont, to have said more than that Jesus was the Messiah, and his possibly angelic guide does not say exactly that. At the end of the dialogue Trypho advises him to get himself circumcised, observe the Law, and resume the study of Platonic philosophy,[59] a dead man of Palestine cannot have been the Messiah. What is lacking, as far as Tillemont can see, is the fulfilment and transformation of Platonism; the injunction that we can know the Logos because it has been incarnate; the secret of Justin's discontent with philosophy, and its resolution. Justin seems to have thought there was a very long road to travel through the two interacting cultures, before this could be said. He begins what others like Clement of Alexandria were to elaborate, a programme of subverting Greek cosmology by insisting that it was derived from the truths revealed to Moses. This means that Christian thought is about to annex and transform philosophy as it has already done to prophecy; the foolishness and the stumbling block are both to be overcome. But the language of John's Gospel is irreversibly Platonic; it is the Logos which has been *incarné et crucifié*. For lack of any understanding of this, Greek philosophy must remain human, sinful and incapable of transcendence. It will not be incapable of persecution, and Justin, who opened his *First Apology* with an irenic address to the two philosopher-emperor Antonines, will end a martyr, flogged before decapitation, although, Tillemont remarks, he was a Roman citizen.[60] This came about – modern and ancient scholarship concur[61] – in the reign of Antoninus Pius jointly with Marcus, and probably at Rome.

'During the whole course of his reign', Gibbon was to observe in chapter 16,[62] 'Marcus despised the Christians as a philosopher, and

[58] Allert, 2002, p. 85; *Mémoires*, II, p. 420. [59] *Mémoires*, II, p. 421. [60] Ibid., II, p. 191.
[61] Ibid., II, p. 435; Allert, 2002, p. 30. [62] Womersley, 1994, I, p. 551.

punished them as a sovereign.' Contempt in Gibbon's mind could and even should accompany tolerance,[63] but the two motives are not easy to separate. What made the Christians philosophically absurd was at the same time a defiance of authority. Tillemont finds himself between two explanations; on the one hand worship of any unauthorised god was an offence against standing law; on the other faith enjoined the Christians to a contempt of earthly values – *spernere mundum*, *spernere sese*[64] – when compared with the knowledge of a saviour God, who was the Word made Flesh. It was a question whether they could delay challenging the law in the name of grace until the law brought them before its tribunals and threatened punishment if they would not abandon the challenge. At the level of intellectual debate, where he and sometimes Marcus operated, Justin Martyr had posed a challenge to philosophy which was also a challenge to faith. Without doubting that the unlearned could find their own way to Christ – as many martyrs had[65] – he had declared the two inseparable for the learned. Philosophy was his way to the knowledge of God, but was incapable of completing the journey; a conversion experience, involving the acceptance of knowledge both historical and sacred, was necessary before the intellect could comprehend the Word made Flesh. This is why his best-known work is a dialogue with Jews, whose historical resistance must be overcome, not with Greeks whose philosophy must be challenged and perfected. The role of philosophy, however, both necessary and imperfect, now becomes a double one. As the work of unconverted intellect, knowing the Logos but not its incarnation, it belongs to the fallen world; it can be condemned as the expression of human pride and self-sufficiency, and seen as conducting persecution in the name of a world that can bear neither challenge nor redemption.

On its other face, philosophy offered a positive, but dangerous, contribution to Christian understanding. If it were a Platonic Logos that had been made Flesh, philosophy might not be necessary to, but could not be eliminated from, conversion and acceptance. Its discourse concerning the Logos would not cease in the new intellectual situation Justin indicated, and if Christianity was not simply a species of philosophy, it was philosophy in a new sense.[66] It must make its own statements in a Christian discourse concerning incarnation, and what these statements were to be must be scrutinised by a Christian intellect which could not henceforth dispense

[63] Mankin, 1996. [64] A much-quoted medieval adage, sometimes ending *spernere nullum*.
[65] Justin, *Second Apology*; Roberts and Donaldson, 1867, p. 80. [66] *Mémoires*, II, p. 378.

with philosophy. Justin is therefore the first – Origen will be another and a greater – doctor of the Church whom Tillemont records as examined and faulted for errors in formulating an orthodoxy we see as Nicene, but Tillemont insists was inherent in the primitive tradition.

> Les philosophes remarquent que la melancolie attaque ordinairement les plus grands esprits . . . Nous pouvons dire de mesme qu'il y a quelquefois de certaines défauts dans les écrivains Ecclesiastiques, qui estant mauvais en eux mesmes, le laissent pas de nous donner du respect par ceux en qui ils se trouvent, parceque ce sont des marques qu'ils appartiennent à ces premiers siecles, on l'on travailloit plus à établir les principaux fondemens de la foy, et de la pureté des mœurs, qu'à examiner beaucoup de questions difficiles ou moins importantes, qui Dieu ne vouloit éclaircir que dans la suite des temps par le ministere des Saints Docteurs. On peut mettre en ce rang quelques sentimens de S. Justin, qui estoient assez communs dans les premier siecles, et qui sont aujourd'hui ou abandonnez ou rejettez de tout le monde.[67]
>
> [Philosophers observe that melancholia commonly afflicts the most powerful intellects . . . We may say then there are sometimes certain faults in the ecclesiastical writers which are wrong in themselves but do not diminish our respect for those in whom we find them, since they indicate that they are phenomena of the first centuries, when man laboured more to establish the chief foundations of the faith and the purity of men's lives, than to examine overmuch the difficult and minor questions which God willed should be made clear only in the course of time, by the ministry of the holy doctors. We may deal in this way with certain opinions of St Justin, common enough in the first centuries, but now abandoned or rejected on all sides.]

These mis-steps are of two kinds. Justin wrote of angels as possessing substance not altogether incorporeal, so that some to whom the world had been entrusted mingled with the daughters of men and begat the demons who were the pagan gods.[68] This duality among the spiritual beings might have gnostic implications, but arose from a misunderstanding of the idea of substance. He was also one among many early Christians who entertained the thought of a thousand-year rule of Christ and the saints.[69] This error was laid at the door of St Papias, last to have seen the Apostle John and heard him preach; a saintly but silly man, it was generally said, who had misunderstood his teacher.[70] Justin's two mistakes, if set together, might appear almost Cerinthan; but the doctrine here set before us is that of

[67] Ibid., II, pp. 423–4. [68] Ibid. [69] Ibid., II, p. 425.
[70] Ibid.; see also especially Fleury, 1716, I, pp. 303–4 ('il avoit l'esprit fort petit'); Eusebius, III, xxxix, 13. There was an alternative account in which Cerinthus was made the originator of millenarianism.

the tradition of the Church, which may take time to find final expression but is capable of correcting the errors into which the Fathers, if not the Apostles, may fall by the way. Two generations before Tillemont, Denis Petau (Petavius) had written at length[71] to prove that the Fathers were not infallible, but – or rather, and therefore – tradition was; an appeal to authority interesting to the Gallican intellect, drawn to the possibility that general councils might correct even popes, but dangerously so to the early Enlightened mind, which by a slight but significant turn converted it into the doctrine that there was no expression of belief not limited by the capacity of reason to control it.

(iv)

As the *Mémoires* proceed through pre-Constantinian history in the order in which Tillemont is arranging them, the themes that concern him become visible and change in pattern. He is less concerned than Eusebius, or perhaps Fleury, with exhibiting the unbroken order of bishops and other office holders; the calendar of saints and martyrs celebrated in the several churches, notably the Gallican, does most to determine the contents of his earlier volumes. It is also worth noting that he is not much concerned with miracles; while doubtless orthodox in his belief that they occur from time to time, as signs of special authority and sanctity in those making them, he does not seem to emphasise their continuity as evidence of the continuity of the Church. Of St Gregory Thaumaturgus (whose very name suggests exceptionality) he remarks that it is rare for a teacher of doctrine to work miracles, and gives more space to his philosophical works as an associate of Origen.[72] The connecting themes of Tillemont's treatment of the third century are, on the one hand, Christian philosophy and the struggle for orthodoxy, and on the other, persecution and martyrdom. It is the martyrs, more than the miracles or the bishops and at least as much as the bishops and doctors, who carry on the life of the Church; each martyr is a witness and her or his death an utterance of the Word, and one may almost wonder how the Church's life is continued after persecutions cease. Meanwhile, there are changes in the pattern of narrative, and philosophy plays its part in the history of persecution.

Justin, and (Tillemont believes) Irenaeus, suffer martyrdom under Marcus Aurelius. The Christians

[71] Petau, 1644–50. [72] *Mémoires*, iv, pp. 315–41.

avoient souffert sous ce prince une persecution continuelle, mesme depuis l'edit qu'il avoit fait en leur faveur.[73] Mais Commode qui luy succeda, n'imita point du tout ni les vertus morales de son pere, ni la haine que ces vertus mesme, et son affection pour la philosophie, luy avoient inspirée contre le Chrétiens. Ainsi par la misericorde de Dieu, toutes les Eglises de la terre se trouverent sous luy dans une assez grande tranquillité.[74]

[had suffered continual persecution under this emperor, even after the edict he had pronounced in their favour. But Commodus, who succeeded him, imitated neither the moral virtues of his father, nor the hatred which these very virtues, combined with the love of philosophy, had inspired in him against the Christians. Thus by the mercy of God, the churches in all the earth found themselves in general tranquillity under Commodus's rule.]

We are at the point from which Gibbon's narrative of the principate's history began;[75] but in Tillemont's history of persecution Commodus plays a less pivotal role. Under Marcus, as later under Julian, philosophy and even virtue, unaided by grace, may become princes of this world and set out to persecute the Church; but Commodus, who has no virtue, is free of this temptation (is this perhaps a Jansenist perception?). Persecution is resumed under the grim Septimius Severus, certainly no philosopher, but a man concerned for the authority of the state (or his own), which he sees the Christians as disobeying. Tillemont, however, falls back on the point that it was the ancient standing laws of Rome they disobeyed; that this left magistrates free to act or not, as they saw fit and as emperors like Trajan might advise; and that when they proceeded against Christians, it was often under pressure from the people or the mob (Pilate's predicament become Gentile and perpetual). This meant that Marcus's leniency was often disregarded, Severus's persecution often sporadic. It meant also that persecution still displayed the paradox observed by Tertullian; it was intended less to punish the Christians than to oblige them to escape punishment, and the more they refused this escape the more it seemed that they were rejecting law, society and life itself. We are nearing, though we have not yet reached, the point where the state will decide to extinguish Christianity by systematic repression.

Tertullian is cited at length, however, in developing an ambivalence in the Christian position which does more to supply the context of persecution than merely to react to it. Severus had little to fear from the Christians, since they held aloof from the state and obeyed any emperor as fully as

[73] Tillemont accepts the story that Marcus suspended persecution out of gratitude to his Christian legions (ibid., III, p. 4).
[74] Ibid., III, p. 55. [75] DF, I, ch. 4, FDF, p. 446.

any other. Tillemont's Tertullian goes on to depict this abstention from the political as a retreat into the self.

> Je ne dois rien à la barreau, rien à l'épée, rien aux affaires; je n'importune point les magistrates, je ne brigue point les suffrages, je ne fais point de basses civilitez à personne: je ne plaide point, je ne vais point à la guerre, je ne parois point dans les assemblées, je me retire en moy mesme; c'est là mon unique affaire; et je n'ay point d'autre soin que de m'exemter de tout soin. C'est dans le secret qu'on apprend à bien vivre, et non à la veue du monde. Que les Stoïciens dissent tant qu'ils veulent qu'il faut se mesler des affaires publiques: Quiconque meurt pour soy, naist et vit aussi pour soy.[76]
>
> [I owe nothing to the courts, nothing to the sword, nothing to business; I ask nothing of the magistrates, I do not canvass for votes, I pay no base compliment to anyone. I do not plead, I go not to the war; I am not seen in the assemblies. I retire into myself; there is my sole business; I have no care but to free myself of all care. It is in the hidden life that one learns to live well, not in the sight of the world. Let the Stoics say as much as they like that one must take one's place in public affairs. Whoever dies for himself is born and lives for himself.]

But this is too close to the pagan (or, Gibbon would add, to the monastic). The Christian does not live and die for himself, but for a God who lived and died for him, having been made flesh and dwelt among us. To dwell is a social as well as a personal act; the Christian must live in civil society with his fellows; but he does so by values which transcend the social and the secular. He has made his case against Marcus Aurelius; the latter's dutifulness has its own cruelty; but the magistrate is faced with a citizen who may at any moment either withdraw from society, or act in it according to values known only to him and his spiritual guides (whoever they may be). This is the point at which Gibbon is saying the ancient world came to an end; it is also the point at which Tertullian's account of the Christian as living only within himself can no longer hold. Tillemont goes on, with Tertullian in hand, to give a totally contrary account of the Christians at the end of the second century as living in the towns, working in the fields, serving in the armies, the Senate, the imperial household, 'partout en un mot, hormis dans les temples et dans les theatres'.[77] They were obliged to do all this for the religious reason that it was their purpose to sanctify the flesh and the flesh lives in society, and for the practical reason that their numbers had increased to the point where they were a significant portion of society. The imperial state could not fail to notice this, and when it did, the problem of those living in society by values which included but

[76] *Mémoires*, III, p. 115. [77] Ibid. 'In a word, everywhere, except the temples and the playhouses.'

transcended those of society must become a problem of state. How state and society were to live with such fellow citizens was a problem that had never before arisen; even Socrates had not presented it.

Tillemont now gives an account of the rapid spread of Christianity, which he attributed to the presence in the world of values beyond the world, which simultaneously explain both the spread of persecution and its failure. These are not secular but spiritual explanations, which is why they change the world.

L'excellence de leur vertu, qui passoit tout ce qui l'imagination des philosophes s'estoit pu figurer de plus parfait, estoit assurément le principal instrument de ce grand changement que le sang et la toutepuissance de Dieu faisoit dans le monde, et sur tout cette constance admirable avec laquelle ils enduroient tous les tourmens les plus cruels. On vouloit savoir d'où venoit une si grande generosité; en s'en informant on apprenoit ce que c'estoit que le Christianisme; en l'apprenant on l'admiroit, on l'aimoit et on l'embrassoit. On commençoit ainsi à haïr ce que l'on avoit esté, et à souhaiter de mourir pour une religion pour laquelle on n'avoit eu que de la haine tant qu'on l'avoit ignorée.[78]

[The excellence of their virtue, which surpassed every perfection that philosophers could imagine, was assuredly the instrument of the great change which the blood and the omnipotence of God was making in the world; above all, the amazing constancy with which they endured the cruellest of torments. One wished to know the source of so great a heroism; on enquiry one learned what Christianity was; in learning this one admired, then loved, then embraced it. Then one began to hate what one had been, and to long to die for a religion one had hated while one knew nothing of it.]

Sanguis martyrum semen ecclesiae. The outstanding virtues of Christians included but exceeded those of social living; if the bad hoped for pardon the good hoped for reward;[79] but it goes beyond any suggestion that Christianity spread because the faithful were better neighbours than the heathen. It is not the pursuit of death, but the indifference to torture, which amazes the onlooker (it is fair to add that Christian martyrs were neither suicides[80] nor homicides); but it is the contempt of death which brings about a reversal of values. Martyrdom is more the cause than the effect of the spread of Christianity; and because it is the effect of transcendent values, Tillemont does say at this point that transcendent experiences accompany that spread.

[78] Ibid., III, p. 116. [79] Ibid.

[80] The exceptions are women who drowned themselves to escape rape by persecutors. For the problem of voluntary martyrdom as suicide, and the concept of martyrdom as it took shape in late antiquity, see Bowersock, 1995.

Tertullien dit qu'une grande partie de payens venoient à la connoissance de Dieu par des visions et des songes dans lesquels il les appelloit à luy . . . Il semble mesme que peu de personnes fussent converties en cette fin du II° siecle sans quelque prodige et quelque marque extraordinaire de la grandeur de Dieu, qui imprimoit du respect et de la terreur dans l'esprit des payens, en sorte que les maris n'osoient mesme importuner leurs femmes pour savoir ce qui se passoit parmi les Chrétiens.[81]

[Tertullian says that a great many pagans came to the knowledge of God by way of visions and dreams in which he called them to him . . . It seems indeed that few persons were converted towards the end of the second century without some prodigy or extraordinary mark of God's power, which imprinted awe and terror in the minds of the pagans, to a point where husbands dared not enquire of their wives what was going on among the Christians,]

a detail of the gender politics of conversion into which Tillemont does not go further. Dreams and visions are not quite miracles, but they are a sign that spiritual power is at work in spreading Christianity; the confessors, however, operate not by miracles but by martyrdoms. Persecution and witness are building to a point where the Church is changing the world, but persecution has not reached the height of its self-defeating powers. Tertullian, under Severus, is the analyst of persecution in its Hadrianic or Antonine form, the police action of magistrates who find their actions necessary but distasteful; he does not live to see it the deliberate policy of state it becomes under Decius and Diocletian.

Tertullian is now dismissed, with a forty-page entry[82] on his works before and after his lapse into Montanism. This heresy is said to be ecclesiastical rather than theological, a wrong view of the nature of the Church rather than of God; but after further popes and martyrs and a note of a fresh persecution (the sixth) under Maximin,[83] Tillemont arrives at a development of grave importance in the histories of the Church and philosophy. This is the advent of neo-Platonism, to which Gibbon had devoted a paragraph at the end of his thirteenth chapter,[84] citing at that point no source other than Porphyry's life of Plotinus; he had presented the school as disastrous in the history of philosophy, but significant in that of the Church. The lineage of philosophers of which it consisted, at Alexandria rather than Athens, included both Christians and pagans, and it supplied both a massive accretion of Platonist ideas to the discourse of the incarnate Logos, and a countervailing body of thought, also Platonist, presenting a view of the universe in which incarnation had no place. Tillemont had therefore to navigate with care, and began by laying down the premise that

[81] *Mémoires*, III, pp. 116–17. [82] Ibid., III, pp. 196–236.
[83] Ibid., III, p. 263. [84] Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 398–9; FDF, pp. 483–5.

Ammonius Sacca, the founder of this school, had been and remained a Christian; a statement derived from Eusebius[85] but by no means universally accepted, which he had to maintain by denying Porphyry's assertion that Ammonius had abandoned this barbarous sect as his studies in philosophy progressed.[86] The issue was that neo-Platonism had arrived at and sharpened the knife-edge at which Justin Martyr had placed himself: the point at which philosophy contained everything necessary to the knowledge of God but the revealed historical fact of incarnation. Alexandrian Platonism had achieved a doctrine of the Logos as of the same substance as God and equal with him, necessary to the Johannine formula of incarnation; it remained to be seen whether philosophy, or philosophers going beyond it, could take the final step and affirm that the Logos was Christ. Tillemont has recourse to the greatest of Latin Christian authors.

S. Augustin qui avoit tiré de grands avantages de la lecture de leurs livres, ne craint point de dire qu'il y avoit trouvé tout ce que nous croyons de la grandeur de Dieu, et de la necessité de nous unir à luy pour estre heureux, appuyé par un grand nombre de raisons; qu'il y avoit trouvé que la Verbe avoit la mesme essence que son Pere, et estoit égal à Dieu, quoiqu'ils le disent en d'autres termes; mais qu'il n'y avoit pas trouvé l'humiliation et l'Incarnation de ce mesme verbe, ni la puissance de la grace divine, ni cette humble pieté, et ce sacrifice d'un cœur contrit, ni plusieurs autres veritez, qui ne se recontrent que dans le Christianisme.[87]

[St Augustine, who had profited greatly by reading their books, does not hesitate to say that he had found there all that we believe concerning the greatness of God, and the need to unite ourselves with him if we would be happy, supported by a great wealth of reasonings; that he had found there that the Word was of the same essence as the Father and equal with God, though this was expressed in other terms; but that he had not found in them the humiliation and incarnation of that Word, nor the power of divine grace, the humble piety, the sacrifice of a contrite heart, nor a number of other truths to be met with only in Christianity.]

The meaning of incarnation was to be found in repentance and redemption, not in some finally triumphant perception by the intellect, and this was what philosophers were tempted to forget. It was possible to believe that Plato and other ancients had foreseen the coming of Christ – especially if one attributed to them some knowledge of Moses and the prophets – but had withheld their beliefs as more than the people could bear. They had confined themselves to exposing the weaknesses of other philosophies, and this was how Platonism had become Academic; but with the coming of Christ the truth could be revealed, and this should have been the work

[85] Eusebius, VI, XIX, 7–10. [86] Quoted at ibid., VI, xix, 5; *Mémoires*, III, p. 279.
[87] *Mémoires*, III, p. 281.

of the neo-Platonists, 'les condisciples de Plotin, c'est à dire les disciples d'Ammone'.[88] But Plotinus must appear at this point more than a heresiarch, in fact a neo-pagan; he had stopped short of faith and proclaimed a knowledge of the Word by the mind which stood in no need of incarnation. This was the sin of curiosity, a seemingly austere grandeur of intellect, which easily fell into thaumaturgy and imposture. We have met, earlier in this series, with several Enlightened indictments of lawgivers and prophets on precisely this ground, but we now discern the charge to have had Christian origins. When Gibbon remarked of the neo-Platonists that they 'by a very singular revolution, converted the study of philosophy into that of magic',[89] he was simply echoing the Christian charge against Plotinus himself.

> Porphyre attribue à Plotin des choses extraordinaires; par lesquelles il pretend montrer que c'estoit un homme divin, et qui avoit trouvé le moyen de s'unir à Dieu, comme c'estoit, dit-il, son unique but. Mais ce qu'il nous apprend par là, c'est que c'estoit un veritable magicien: et il ne le dissimule pas beaucoup en un endroit. Il luy attribute un demon familier, et raporte de luy cette parole impie et insolente, Que c'estoit à ses dieux à venir à luy, et non pas à luy à les aller trouver. Au moment qu'il mourut on vit un dragon sous son lit, qui estoit la vraie image de celui avec qui il alloit souffrir les supplices de l'enfer; pendant que ses disciples allumoient encore plus d'un siecle après, des feux sacrileges sur les autels qu'ils luy avoient dressez.[90]
>
> [Porphyry attributes extraordinary and supernatural actions to Plotinus, claiming thereby to show that he was a godlike man, who had found the means of uniting himself to God, which he said was his only purpose. But what this tells us is that he was really a magician, as Porphyry does not conceal from us at another point. He attributes to him a familiar demon, and reports him as making the impious and insolent statement that it was for his gods to come to him, not for him to go in search of them. At the moment of his death a dragon was seen under his bed, the true image of him with whom he must now go to suffer the torments of hell; while his disciples, even more than a century after, lit sacrilegious fires on altars which they had erected to him.]

It was in this setting that neo-Platonists revived the legend of Apollonius of Tyana,[91] but we have here a more sophisticated account of how a philosopher might become a wonder-worker. It is further developed in a volume of Tillemont's companion series the *Histoire des empereurs*, where Porphyry appears as the chief profane author of the reign of Diocletian and we gain a clearer idea of what Christian writers understood to be magic.

[88] Ibid. [89] Womersley, 1994, I, p. 399. [90] *Mémoires*, III, p. 286. [91] Ibid., III, p. 286.

Le but de la philosophie des Platoniciens, bien elevez en cela audessus des autres philosophes, estoit de chercher Dieu, et d'aller à luy. Mais on n'y peut aller que par la Croix de J.C., unique mediateur entre les hommes et Dieu. Mais Porphyre est trop superbe pour embrasser cette voie d'humilité et des souffrances. Ainsi il chercha dans les demons de faux mediateurs, et tomba comme plusieurs autres disciples de Plotin, dans les curiositez sacrileges de la magie, à laquelle il donne le nom specieux de Theourgie, c'est à dire de dëification ou operation divine. Cela peut sembler difficile à croire, puisqu'il paroist condanner luy mesme la magie, et toute liaison avec les demons. Cependant non seulement Eusebe l'accuse en divers endroits d'avoir eu commerce avec ses dieux, comme S. Augustin dit qu'il avoit appris avec beaucoup de travail la science des Caldeans; non seulement il loue lui-même Plotin de diverses choses qui sont visiblement des effets de la magie; mais il se vante encore de s'estre une fois approché de Dieu, et de s'estre uni à luy. On scait ce que cela signifie dans le language de ces Platoniciens.

And Tillemont quotes Eunapius of Sardis, the historian of the neo-Platonists:

Pour ce qui est des choses de la nature et de la Theourgie, laissons cela aux secrets cachés et aux mysteres.[92]

[The goal of philosophy for these Platonists, which exalted them high above other philosophers, was to seek God and make their way toward him. But we can reach him only by the Cross of Jesus, sole mediator between men and God. Porphyry, however, was too proud to embrace the way of humility and suffering. Therefore he sought out demons as mediators, and fell like other disciples of Plotinus into the sacrilegious curiosity of magic, to which he gave the specious name Theurgy, meaning self-deification or divine action. This may seem hard to believe, since he appears to condemn all magic and trafficking with the demons. None the less, not only does Eusebius accuse him in several places of commerce with the gods, as St Augustine says that he applied himself with much toil to the knowledge of the Chaldeans; not only does he himself praise Plotinus for several things which are visibly the effects of magic; but he boasts of having once drawn near to God and joined himself with him. We know what this means in the language of these Platonists.]

[As for these matters of nature and theurgy, let us leave all that to the hidden secrets and the mysteries.]

It is uncertain, and perhaps irrelevant, whether we are to believe that Plotinus and Porphyry sought out lesser deities as servants of a greater one, or whether the *daimones* (still in Porphyry identified with the pagan gods) were treated as allegories or mysteries. The question is that of magic. Theurgy, in its neo-Platonic sense, was not conjuring or necromancy, but a

[92] *Empereurs*, 1732, IV, p. 30. Cf. Fleury's account of Plotinus; Fleury, 1716, II, pp. 357–60.

drawing of the divine to one's self; Christians took this for a manipulation of the divine, amounting to magic. To claim that the Word by which all things had been made had not become Flesh was to claim that it remained an Idea, within the philosopher's knowledge; to claim that the knower became one with the substance of the universe was to fall into enthusiasm; to claim that by speaking the Word, or by the Word speaking in one, deeds of knowledge and power might be performed, was to become a wizard or magician like Simon Magus. In an earlier volume of this series[93] we saw the *philosophe* Anquetil-Duperron presenting Zoroaster as caught in the enthusiast's dilemma between imposture and self-deception, and something very similar may be what Tillemont is saying of the philosopher as godlike man. Gibbon's judgement of Plotinus and Porphyry was to differ very widely from Tillemont's, resting in the last analysis on a total rejection of the Logos, whether Platonic or Johannine; but within this polar difference, the two verdicts almost coincide.

Fleury, in a passage of his third volume devoted to Eusebius's *Praeparatio Evangelica*, further enlarges on this perception of the neo-Platonists in a way which was to be important to Mosheim and Gibbon.

> Ces philosophes mysterieux, dont la plus célébre est Porphyre, ruinoient l'idolatrie en la voulant rendre raisonnable. Car ils mettoient un Dieu souverain, au dessous duquel étoient d'autres dieux subalternes, puis des démons bons ou mauvais, en enfin des héros. Il n'y avoient que les mauvais démons, qui demandassent des sacrifices sanglantes; ils étoient aussi les auteurs des oracles, des divinations et de toute le magie: or ces philosophes enseignoient qu'il falloit renoncer au culte des démons, pour servir le Dieu souverain; et ce Dieu étoit si grand selon eux, que tout culte extérieur, même de paroles, étoit indigne de lui: ainsi il ne devoit rester parmi les hommes de marque sensible de religion.[94]
>
> [Those mystical philosophers, of whom Porphyry is the best known, destroyed idolatry in the attempt to make it intelligible. They supposed one sovereign God, below whom were ranked other subordinate gods, then demons good or evil, and finally heroes. Only the evil demons demanded blood sacrifices, and they were the authors of oracles, divinations and all forms of magic. These philosophers taught that we must renounce the worship of demons and serve only the supreme God; and that he was so great that all external worship, even in words, was unworthy of him, so that no visible mark of worship might survive among men.]

Gnōsis has swallowed up magic, but theurgy has taken its place. The philosophers are trying to save polytheism by making the cultic gods emanations of an absolute God who can nevertheless be known. The enlightened must cast off all ritual worship, though one strongly suspects

[93] BSE, pp. 34–5. [94] Fleury, 1716, III, pp. 8–9.

that the vulgar will continue in it; and if their worship of the being beyond all being is purely contemplative and silent, they may command the lesser deities and use them as means of ascent to the absolute. Since the demons are not denied existence, the philosophers are open to the charge of manipulating them, and magic has made its way in by the back door.

The term 'philosopher' had long been used to denote wandering thaumaturges as well as academic metaphysicians, and it was not impossible to speak of the 'divine philosophy of Jesus Christ'.[95] The Christian memory had space for both Apollonius of Tyana and Simon Magus, and in the criticism of the neo-Platonists we have come almost full circle to reach the latter figure. If he worked magic such that he was thought 'the great power of God', a Platonist who claimed to have reached God without recourse to Christ might claim that his *gnōsis* brought the same power and the same magic; that Platonists altogether condemned the dualisms and anti-creationisms of the gnostics was a secondary matter. But the Christians now encountered a dilemma of their own. Since Justin Martyr it had been accepted that Platonic philosophy taught everything about the knowledge that brought unity with God except how to achieve it; this was possible only through acceptance of the risen (and historic) Christ. But Justin had enlarged the foolishness of the Pauline Word into knowledge of the Logos, preceding the knowledge that knowledge was not enough. The massive revival of Platonism at Alexandria had faced the Christians with philosophers who were not even heretics, since they claimed to know God without Christ; within their own ranks, however, it faced them with a knowledge of the Logos so subtle and complex that the Word made Flesh could not be articulated without it, and within which discourse there was room for disagreement as to whether the Word was being articulated correctly.

Ammonius Sacca had a divided inheritance. As well as Plotinus, it is said to include Origen (although there is some question of a pagan bearing the same name). Where Ammonius receives thirteen pages, Tillemont's *mémoire* on Origen numbers one hundred,[96] and we are left in no doubt that the reason for this is his unbelievably divided and divisive reputation. He was never a martyr and never a heresiarch, but

> l'estime generale qu'on a eue pour luy durant quelque temps, l'a encore moins fait connoistre que la persecution qui s'est ensuite elevée contre luy, ou par sa faute, ou par malheur, ou par la jalousie que l'on avoit conceue de sa reputation . . . Les Saints mesmes se sont trouvez opposez les unes aux autres sur son sujet. Des martyrs ont

[95] E.g. *Mémoires*, III, p. 182, with reference to Clement of Alexandria.
[96] Ibid., III, pp. 279–92 (Ammonius), 495–595 (Origen).

fait son apologie; et des martyrs on fait des écrits pour le condanner. Les uns l'ont regardé comme le plus grand maistre qu'ait eu l'Eglise après les Apostres; les autres l'ont detesté comme le pere d'Arius et de tous les autres qui ont combatu l'Eglise par leurs erreurs.[97]

[The general esteem in which he was at first held has done less to make him known than the persecution later stirred up against him, whether by his fault, through misfortune, or from jealousy of his reputation . . . The saints themselves have been opposed to one another on his account. Martyrs have been his apologists, and martyrs have written to condemn him. Some have thought him the greatest master the Church has had since the Apostles, others have abhorred him as the father of Arius and all others who have opposed their errors to the Church.]

The word persecution is a term of such power to Tillemont – it is both the work of the devil and the instrument of God – that it is striking to find him using it in an entirely new way. It is not visited on the Church by the alien powers of this world, but arises within the Church, dividing the saints and martyrs on matters so essential that they should unite them. We are looking at the first – but, Gibbon would ponderously add, not the last – persecution of Christians by Christians; and its cause is that they cannot agree on the Incarnation of the Word even while they are battling for it against those who reject it. We have reached the point where heresies arise within the Church as it seeks to unite around its centre; the history of disputation has begun and Gibbon will place it at the centre of his history of authority. This happens – supposing that Origen is indeed a pupil of Ammonius – because of the unmanageable wealth of definitions and distinctions that neo-Platonism has brought to the discourse of Word and Flesh; the burden of the schools, from which humanism, Protestantism and Enlightenment will offer to liberate the Christian evangel – if it can be defined without that burden.

Origen stirs up this huge cloud of dispute in two ways. He addresses the problem of prophecy and philosophy, and offers to deal with it by discovering in each the hidden presence of the other. Like Christians annexing the Hebrew Scriptures by converting them into types and figures, he discovers in Greek philosophy hidden allegories and esoteric meanings,[98] a hermeneutic far distant from the foolishness of the Pauline Word. It is significant that Tillemont follows Eusebius in quoting the anti-Christian Porphyry on how Origen did this, observing that Porphyry thought Christianity barbarous because it had been Jewish, and arrogant because it offered to teach mysteries to the unlearned.[99] But allegory was a dangerous tool,

[97] *Mémoires*, III, p. 495. [98] Ibid., III, p. 518 (quoting Porphyry). [99] Ibid., III, p. 517.

since it pointed away from the simplicity of the Word, and in so doing indicated that the Logos was becoming the subject of a philosophy so sophisticated that it both evoked and rejected allegory. Here it was that Origen stirred up much of the storm against him; brilliant and perhaps self-intoxicated, he stated and examined every question that could possibly arise as the new Platonism enlarged upon the relations of Word and Flesh, Word and God, Father and Son, the Platonic Trinity and the Christian; like Peter Abelard nine centuries later, he stated the case for every position whether it had been condemned or not. His fault was less error than curiosity, the pursuit of intellect rather than message, the expansion of possibilities beyond what could or should be proposed. Again, the Christian criticism of philosophy resembles the Enlightened criticism that would be turned against it; but it is possibly a Jansenist voice we hear in Tillemont's last word on Origen. He will not be condemned by God, says Tillemont, but

> si neanmoins il faut encore trembler pour luy, tremblons encore plus pour nous mesmes, et recourons de tout nostre cœur à la misericorde de Dieu, pour obtenir de luy par nos prieres, et par une application infatigable à l'œuvre de nostre salut, que nous ne tombions point dans les fautes qui nous font trembler pour un Origen.[100]
>
> [if none the less we must tremble for him, let us tremble even more for ourselves; let us throw ourselves with a full heart on the mercy of God, beseeching him by our prayers, and by indefatigable toil in the work of our salvation, that we do not fall into the faults which make us tremble for one such as Origen.]

These are words of devotion, but the history of the Church is taking a new turn. We are passing from the age of the gnostics to the age of the Arians, though the former are about to be reborn on the Roman–Persian frontiers in the shape of Manichaeism;[101] from an age in which the Church confronted a world-view incompatible with incarnation to one in which the definition of the latter became the boundary between truth and error. Like the Lutheran Mosheim after him, Tillemont dated this change, though in his case without saying so, from the advent of neo-Platonism. Before Manichaeism he places the heresy of the Sabellians,[102] who claimed that the three persons of the Trinity were three aspects of one God, and that the consubstantiality of persons meant not that they were equal but that they were identical. We are disputing within a Johannine consensus as we move into the last age of the persecutions.

[100] Ibid., III, p. 595. [101] Ibid., IV, pp. 367–411.
[102] Ibid., IV, pp. 237–42, and the study of Dionysius of Alexandria that follows it (pp. 242–88).

(v)

The *Mémoires* proceed differently from the *Histoire des empereurs*, but as we approach the revolution wrought by Constantine, it is necessary to read Tillemont as author of both together. The *Histoire* is concerned with the emperors as secular actors, but since Tillemont's primary interest is the Church he cannot refrain from placing their impact upon it at the centre of his narrative. As he wrote when introducing this work,

> il y a une telle liaison entre l'histoire sainte, et la profane, qu'il faut necessairement s'instruire avec soin de la derniere pour pouvoir posseder l'autre, et pour en resoudre solidement les difficultez.[103]
>
> [there is so close a connection between sacred and secular history that one must carefully study the latter in order to master the former, and resolve its difficulties thoroughly.]

This does not mean that sacred history is intelligible only in the context of the secular; it is equally possible that the meaning of the secular is to be found in its impact upon the sacred, and that we study the latter as it responds triumphantly to these impacts. We must remember also that the *Mémoires* exist *pour servir à l'histoire ecclésiastique*, not *pour l'écrire*; there may be an *histoire ecclésiastique* being written by Claude Fleury and others, but the meaning of the Church is not necessarily to be found in any comprehensive narrative that may be written of its adventures in worldly time; we are in a Jansenist and Augustinian world where such narratives are not the key to divine reality. Tillemont in fact writes the history of the last great persecutions as the occasion for collecting and articulating the acts of the martyrs. He is by no means incapable of observing that they were the last, that they were great, that they differed from earlier persecutions, or that a new era in the Church's history began when Constantine brought them to an end. As historians of historiography, we are interested in these observations, but they are not necessarily what most interested him.

It is therefore the case that the *Mémoires* and the *Histoire des empereurs* both deal with the persecutions, situating them in the contexts of different histories but recognising that these overlap. The case is otherwise with Gibbon, who in his chapter 14 recounted the wars of the tetrarchs with no indication that persecution and toleration were part of their politics, and in chapter 16, we shall find, presented a history of persecution rather philosophical (in an eighteenth-century sense) than narrative and in no

[103] *Empereurs*, 1732, I, p. iii.

sense sacred. The fact remains, however, that for both writers the history of the empire and the history of the Church form two narratives, which must be recounted separately; there may be interchange between them, but there cannot be unification. Even if it is Gibbon's intention to negate the participation of sacred in ecclesiastical history, he must treat the former separately in order to achieve such a purpose; and the subject of the present volume is his separate treatment of church history. We have not arrived at a historicism which can treat church and empire as a single history, and Gibbon's intention is to relate the rise of a new culture and authority, discontinuous with ancient history and beginning a new one.

Tillemont narrates the climactic phase of the persecutions – which concludes the history of the Church before Constantine – in both the *Mémoires* and the *Histoire des empereurs*. The same narrative, and sometimes the same language, is to be found in both series, but the settings are differently constructed. The *Histoire* has concerns other than the actions of the emperors in the history of the Church, though that theme has come to dominate others; and while both series are reliant at this point on the *De Mortibus Persecutorum* of Lactantius,[104] we are more aware in reading the *Histoire* that Lactantius was concerned with the secular as well as the sacred history of these emperors' reigns. As Gibbon had not failed to notice in writing his fourteenth chapter,[105] Lactantius had emphasised the increasing tax burden which was crippling the empire in the reigns of Diocletian and his tetrarchs. Tillemont does not follow him in this, but in the *Histoire* he situates the persecutions in the formally secular context of a sequence of reigns. That conducted by Diocletian is extended past his abdication and death, through the wars of the tetrarchs to the victory of Constantine. The latter's reign immediately follows, but has as a prelude the life of his father Constantius – who as tetrarch of the western provinces held back from persecution – and is related in its entirety as that of the first Christian emperor. It is therefore prolonged into a period with which we are not yet concerned.

The *Mémoires* before Constantine are organised – their organisation takes some time to perceive – around a sequence of persecutions, not of reigns; emperors appear in the narrative as they were or were not persecutors. There is a history of state here; Tillemont selects the persecution under Decius as a turning point, when persecutions by magistrates with imperial permission, but under imperial restraint, gave place to persecutions ordered

[104] For Gibbon's use of Lactantius, see Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1232. For a modern edition and translation, Creed, 1984.

[105] FDF, pp. 481–2.

by emperors in their edicts.[106] But the defeats of Decius and Valerian, and the general crisis of the third century, make this episode transitory; the Illyrian soldier-emperors have other things to do. There ensues a period of peace, before persecution of the Church is renewed under Diocletian, and the history then resumed is that of the Church rather than the empire. The civil wars that end his reign are consequences of his war against the Church,[107] but providentially decreed rather than historically caused. Tillemont and Fleury here follow Eusebius in making the forty years without persecution a period of corruption in the Church, when the increasing wealth and power of bishops give rise to unseemly competition for place and increasing laxity in the laity.[108] The persecutions that follow are willed by God, as means of restoring the Church to its virtue; but that is not the whole of the story.

Under persecution or without it, the Christian religion is spreading into the elites as well as the peoples of the Roman world, and the emperors are concerned to find it in the palace and the armies. Tillemont goes back to the fundamental laws against unauthorised religions in search for a cause of persecution, but this is not enough. Christians are persecuted because they live by laws which are not those of this world; and this, paradoxically, is why their religion is spreading through civil society. We look for a 'modern' explanation, stressing that civil society was working badly under the late empire, but that is not what we find in Tillemont. He presents the persecutions as a period in which the martyrs' contempt for death not only triumphed over their persecutions, but brought them increasing numbers of converts; but *sanguis martyrum semen ecclesiae* is not the whole of the story he has to tell. He is writing to further a history of the Church, not (at least in the *Mémoires*) of civil society; and the Church's triumph in this world is not more than a part of his very Augustinian narrative. As we read him we realise that the martyrs are more than a means of defeating persecution; it is very nearly true that the end of persecution is to bring forth martyrs. By testifying to values not of this world, they continue the life of the Church which exists by those values. Martyrs are all but necessary to the Church; it became corrupt under the forty years' peace in part because there were no martyrs. The contest with heresy must take the place of that with persecution; both were necessities of sacred history.

[106] *Mémoires*, III, p. 309. [107] Ibid., IV, p. 20; *Empereurs*, 1732, IV, p. 19.

[108] Eusebius, I, viii, 7–9; *Mémoires*, IV, pp. 8–9, 38 (Eusebius criticised); Fleury, 1716, II, p. 405. Eusebius says he will say little of those who gave way under persecution: Tillemont suspects that he is covering up both his own weakness and his later Arian leanings. See also V, pp. 95–6.

It is this which explains the structure of Tillemont's fifth volume – the first of twelve to be published after his death on 10 January 1698[109] – and to a lesser degree those preceding it. Accounts of the several persecutions are followed by long lists of martyrs and their sufferings; we read the former in search of historical information, but we are meant to read the latter. Volume IV is subtitled: 'Que comprend l'Histoire de S. Cyprien' – Gibbon's choice of a protomartyr[110] – 'et le reste du troisieme siecle depuis l'an 253'. Volume V 'comprend la persecution de Diocletien (pp. 1–180), celle de Licinius (pp. 502–15), et les Martyrs dont on ignore l'époque'.[111] Tillemont's winding up of his history of martyrdom with those who suffered under Diocletian and at unknown dates totals fifty-six names and fills the rest of a volume of 586 pages. Since martyrs constitute so large a part of the history of the Church it is unsurprising that Tillemont tends to swell their numbers. There has been a long digression in Volume IV designed to show that, though persecution was never as intense in the west as in the east, the *église gallicane* may count its martyrs and can afford the rule that no church should be founded without some relics.[112] Tillemont has already encountered the English scholar Henry Dodwell who had attempted a critical reduction of the number of martyrs, and says this merely shows

> qu'il n'est pas de l'Eglise qui revere les Martyrs, qui les aime, et qui les fait seule. Pour nous, si nous ne trouvons pas la verité, au moins nous le cherchons.[113]
>
> [that he is not of the Church that reveres the martyrs, loves them, and alone gives birth to them. As for us, if we do not find the truth, at least we search for it.]

The last sentence disregarded, Tillemont's words are not incorrect. Dodwell was a high churchman and a non-juror, but the Church of England venerated mainly Protestant martyrs (Charles I included). It did not regard martyrs as essential to its spiritual mission, as Tillemont is close to doing, and at its most Catholic came close to being a patriarchate, claiming equality with Rome on grounds which did not depend upon enumerating their sufferings. For Tillemont, the martyrs of the great persecution are central to the being of the Church; they are a chief vehicle of the dialogue between heaven and earth which the Church exists to conduct, and it is hard to

[109] *Mémoires*, V, 'Avertissement'. The series continued through eleven more volumes, left complete by Tillemont and lacking only his final revisions. He reached only the opening years of the sixth century.

[110] DF, I, ch. 16; Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 541–5; below, p. 278.

[111] The subtitle of the volume; page numbers inserted.

[112] *Mémoires*, IV, pp. 439–561; martyrs in Britain included. Those in Africa follow. See also II, pp. 1–46.

[113] Ibid., IV, p. 7; see also III, p. 22.

imagine its life without their witness and their sacrifice. This dialogue has an earthly history: Diocletian, talked into persecution by Galerius against his better judgement,[114] would rather destroy the infrastructure of Christianity than exterminate its leadership, and they are ordered only to surrender their scriptures. The threat, or opportunity, of death arises with the revival of the demand that they sacrifice to the emperor, and even then the aim of the imperial officers is often conformity rather than conviction; Tertullian's paradox reborn. The police rub the Christians' hands in the ashes of burned incense and send them away; those who insist on confessing their faith are punched up to prevent them speaking; and a contemporary observes that the most dangerous persecutors are those who kill the fewest.[115] New moral choices arise: is it permissible to escape, to bribe the officers, to keep silence? At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we recognise the behaviour of the state clearly enough; but martyrdom itself has become a choice, and therefore a problem. There have been disquieting citations of Origen, to the effect that the Church may become unworthy of persecution,[116] and it is almost a simplification when Tillemont can cite martyr after martyr to whom death was threatened so that it could be embraced. When this happens – and, the state being the state, it happens often enough – the values of the world can be challenged by those that transcend them, and Tillemont is able to report a dialogue between a magistrate named Maximus and a martyr named Julius, in which this divine comedy becomes tragic.

'Accordez-moy cette grace', Maximus says; 'si vous croyez que c'est une peche' (to burn incense to the emperor), 'je le prends sur moy; c'est moy qui vous fais violence'.[117] He may be entirely sincere in his distress, but he is making the threat of death. To our minds, this is the unpardonable intolerance, but it is not exactly this that Julius has in mind.

J'ay pitié de vous, dit encore Maxime; croyez mon conseil, sacrifiez, et ne refusez pas de vivre avec nous. Vivre avec vous, répondit le Saint, c'est mourir pour moy.

['I truly pity you', said Maximus once more; 'be guided by me, make the sacrifice, and do not refuse to live with us'. 'To live with you', the saint replied, 'is death to me'.]

Is it only the act of persecution, the imposition of insincerity, that has made this irreparable breach? When Julius refuses *vivre avec vous*, is he

[114] Ibid., v, pp. 19–22. Cf. the less lenient account of Diocletian, who 'ruine le peuple en multipliant les provinces et les officiers', in *Empereurs*, 1732, iv, pp. 19–26.
[115] *Mémoires*, v, pp. 37–8. [116] Ibid., iii, pp. 306–7.
[117] 'Do me this favour: If you think it is a sin, I take it on myself; it is I who do violence to you.'

rejecting the society of persecutors, or of all whose values are untouched by grace? The retreat into the desert has begun under the persecution.[118] To Gibbon's generation, and probably to ours, toleration is less an act of recognising transcendent values in the minds of others than a policy of bringing them within the civil fold and subject to its consensus; but if Maximus had told Julius to depart in peace, the latter might still have had to proclaim that he lived by values over which the magistrate had no jurisdiction. And what authority did those values confer? There is another side to the dialogue:

> Maxime luy reprocha qu'il estoit bien fou de preferer aux Princes qui regnoient un homme mort en Croix; surquoi le Saint ne rougissant point de la folie de la Croix, et confondant par avance l'impieté des Ariens, luy fit cette réponse: Il est mort pour nos pechez, a fin de nous donner la vie eternelle: mais il est Dieu, et subsiste éternellement. J'ay pitié de vous, dit encore Maxime . . . [119]
>
> [Maximus told him he must be mad to set above the ruling princes a man dead by crucifixion; to which the saint, not blushing at the foolishness of the Cross and confounding by anticipation the impiety of the Arians, made this reply. 'He died for our sins, and to bring us eternal life; but he is God and lives for ever.' 'I truly pity you', said Maximus]

and the dialogue continues. The foolishness of the Word is at the point of becoming the right definition of its incarnation; the martyr is at the point of becoming the orthodox, confronting the heretic in place of the persecutor, and the princes of this world will find choices imposed upon them. Tillemont's sixth (posthumous) volume will conduct us past Constantine's (and Gibbon's) 'establishment of the Christian religion' as far as the Council of Nicaea; but it will arrive there by way of 190 pages on the Donatist schism – a debate on the reunion of the Church after many responses to persecution – and 394 on the Arian heresy, already foreshadowed as a consequence of the Platonisation of the Fourth Gospel.

[118] *Mémoires*, III, pp. 313–14, 323. [119] Ibid., V, pp. 12–13, for the whole exchange.

PART II

The sources of Protestant Enlightenment

The History of the Gospel I hope may be true, though the History of the Church be fabulous.

Conyers Middleton, 1749

CHAPTER 3

Jean Le Clerc and the history of language

(1) GIBBON'S CHOICE OF AUTHORITIES

The origins and progress of Gibbon's interest in ecclesiastical history are ill-documented, and like much else in the history of his scholarship and work methods, difficult to reconstruct. The subject appears in the composition of the *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature* and may well have been in his mind as a student in Lausanne. There are signs of it in his journals between 1759 and 1764, but these are never resumed after his arrival in Rome, and his letters are uninformative as regards his studies. The catalogue of his library reveals many holdings in this area, but does not relate his acquisition or use of any book in addition to its date of publication; and while the footnotes of the *Decline and Fall* tell us much, they do not reveal his use of what he read. Pending the research which might illuminate this matter, we select works that he read, in the hope of furnishing his text with contexts. As we do so, and particularly as we move from his Catholic to his Protestant sources, we begin to encounter the phenomena we will want to call Enlightenment; for the processes we study under that name are predominantly Protestant. There is a Catholic Enlightenment, with a history of its own, but he did not know of it. Gibbon's references go back as much as 100 years, and are often to works published before his birth. We are in a world of Protestant scholarship and controversy that took the form it had for him and his readers after about 1680, and it is not necessarily the context that formed his scepticism or the meaning this had for his readers. Gibbon was a historian and read other historians, and we read those he read in search of the history they debated and rewrote; we shall find that its narrative had not changed greatly since Eusebius, though the purposes with which they wrote it were changing as Enlightenment took shape.

These histories were written within a complex of debates. In the world of Swiss Calvinism, there was the *Confessio Helvetica* which drove Barbeyrac from Lausanne and the rigour of Turrettini which had driven Le

Clerc from Geneva.[1] In the Netherlands the ongoing tension between Calvinists and Arminians was overlaid by the Huguenot emigration and the *république des lettres* which almost took over Dutch intellectual culture; and the Revocation and the Refuge sparked Bayle's decision to rely on critical enquiry and toleration rather than apocalyptic militancy in reply to Louis XIV and Bossuet. In the Anglican world – to employ that slightly anachronistic adjective – the crisis of James II's monarchy led to revolution and a reinforcement of the debate over toleration in which Locke took part.[2] In Lutheran Germany – including Calvinist-ruled Brandenburg – similar debates produced that 'secularisation of the confessional state' associated with Christian Thomasius.[3] All these were brought together and disseminated by the mechanisms of Amsterdam publishing and the journalists of the *république des lettres*. Major philosophers – Locke, Leibniz, Pufendorf – were brought in, along with giants of critical method like Bayle and Le Clerc; and in the context of all this turbulence appeared the ecclesiastical histories (written or not written in reply to Bossuet's *Histoire universelle*)[4] selected by Gibbon as background to the *Decline and Fall*. A footnote to his fifteenth chapter tells us who these historians were.

> In the account of the Gnostics of the second and third centuries, Mosheim is ingenious and candid, Le Clerc dull, but exact; Beausobre almost always an apologist; and it is much to be feared, that the primitive fathers are very frequently calumniators.[5]

He is telling us of Jean Le Clerc (1657–1736) and his *Historia Ecclesiastica duorum primorum a Christo nato saeculorum* (1716); Isaac de Beausobre (1659–1738) and his *Histoire de Manichée et du Manichéisme* (1734–9); and Johann Lorenz von Mosheim (1694–1755) and his two major works, *De Rebus Christianorum ante Constantinum magnum commentarii* (1753) and *Institutionum Historiae Ecclesiasticae libri quattuor* (1755).[6] Their names dominate the footnotes to chapters 15 and 16, and recur in those to chapter 21, published in 1781, where Gibbon sets out the theological prehistory of the Council of Nicaea. Twelve years later, presenting chapter 47, the last of Volume IV (1788), Gibbon wrote:

> It is my design to comprise in the present chapter,[7] a religious war of two hundred and fifty years, to represent the ecclesiastical and political schism of the Oriental sects, and to introduce their clamorous or sanguinary contests, by a modest enquiry into the doctrines of the primitive church.

[1] EEG, ch. 2. [2] Marshall, 1994, 2006. [3] Hunter, 2001, 2007.
[4] Perry, 1973. [5] DF, I, ch. 15, n. 32; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 458.
[6] For these authors see Womersley, 1994, III, pp. 1233, 1196–7, 1243. [7] DF, III, ch. 47, n. 1.

And proceeded in a footnote:

> the numberless passages of antiquity which I have seen with my own eyes are compiled, digested and illustrated, by *Petavius* and *Le Clerc*, by *Beausobre* and *Mosheim*. I shall be content to fortify my narrative by the names and characters of these respectable guides; and in the contemplation of a minute or remote object, I am not ashamed to borrow the aid of the strongest glasses: 1. The *Dogmata Theologica* of Petavius, are a work of incredible labour and compass . . . The Jesuit's learning is copious and correct; his latinity is pure, his method clear, his argument profound and well connected; but he is the slave of the fathers, the scourge of heretics, and the enemy of truth and candour, as often as *they* are inimical to the Catholic cause. 2. The Arminian Le Clerc, who has composed in a quarto volume (Amsterdam, 1716) the ecclesiastical history of the two first centuries, was free both in his temper and situation; his sense is clear, but his thoughts are narrow; he reduces the reason or folly of ages to the standard of his private judgment, and his impartiality is sometimes quickened, and sometimes tainted, by his opposition to the fathers . . . 3. The Histoire Critique du Manicheisme . . . of M. de Beausobre is a treasure of ancient philosophy and theology. The learned historian spins with incomparable art the systematic thread of opinion, and transforms himself by turns into the person of a saint, a sage, or an heretic. Yet his refinement is sometimes excessive; he betrays an amiable partiality in favour of the weaker side, and, while he guards against calumny, he does not allow sufficient scope for superstition and fanaticism . . . 4. Less profound than Petavius, less independent than Le Clerc, less ingenious than Beausobre, the historian Mosheim is full, rational, correct and moderate.[8]

This is citation in the grand manner, respectful and at the same time critical. Gibbon knew the three Protestant scholars – Petavius is the exception – from early moments in his years of study, and employed them in constructing his account of the history of Christian theology. This covers the period from the Council of Nicaea to that of Chalcedon, introduced in chapter 47; the council whose decisions, alienating the Syrian and Egyptian churches, prepared the way for the Persian and Arab conquests and furnish one occasion on which Christian theology can be said to have contributed directly to the Decline and Fall. These histories also figure in chapters 15 and 16, the first of which importantly follows Mosheim; but we shall find that these chapters are not primarily a history of theology, to which Gibbon's five causes are hardly even a prelude. Taken together with Tillemont, however, they offer the *historia ecclesiastica* in which as a context Gibbon's chapters necessarily stand: a history which is still that of Eusebius, re-read and rewritten in what we call the early Enlightenment – meaning the period during which Christian scholarship came to be dominated by

[8] Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 932–3.

critical method, in the formation of which Jean Le Clerc played a leading part. The three Protestant historians will tell us what the history of the early Church had come to be by the time Gibbon composed the two chapters.

(II) THE *ARS CRITICA* AND THE LINGUISTIC TURN

In the *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature* (1761), Gibbon had written, after complaining of the imprisonment within the text he thought characteristic of the Renaissance humanists,

> La lumière alloit parôitre. Descartes ne fut pas littéraire, mais les Belles-lettres lui sont bien redevables. Un philosophe éclairé [n. M. Le Clerc, dans son excellent *Ars Critica*, et dans plusieurs autres de ses ouvrages], héritier de sa méthode, approfondit les vrais principes de la critique.[9]
>
> [Light was about to dawn. Descartes was not a man of letters, but letters are much indebted to him. An enlightened philosopher [n. M. Le Clerc, in his excellent *Ars Critica* and several other writings], heir to his method, has explained in depth the true principles of criticism.][10]

Gibbon expressed no general concept of 'the Enlightenment', but we may read 'la lumière alloit parôitre' as indicating awareness that something of importance was going on. In a footnote some pages later, he paired Beausobre's *Histoire critique* with Middleton's *Free Enquiry* as 'deux beaux monumens d'un siècle éclairé'.[11] The light which would lead the scholar into critical history and freethinking was that of textual criticism, given its late humanist character in Le Clerc's work of 1697, but we may see Gibbon's mention of 'plusieurs autres de ses ouvrages' as indicating some knowledge of Le Clerc's career and publications since he had settled in Amsterdam in 1683, at a moment of some complexity in the history of Enlightenment. Le Clerc had left Geneva to escape the rigorous Calvinism of the elder Turrettini, but he had arrived in Amsterdam when the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes was generating that flood of refugee Huguenots – Pierre Bayle among them – who would transform the *république des lettres* and make it the vehicle of a critical and tolerationist, rather than Calvinist and sectarian, response to Catholic persecution. There had begun a major debate, perhaps initiated by Bossuet, between Catholic and Protestant accounts of ecclesiastical history, and Le Clerc was one of those who exploited Richard Simon's attempt to proclaim the infallibility of tradition

[9] MW, IV, p. 19; EEG, p. 218.
[10] Trans. JGAP, as are all translations in this chapter not otherwise attributed.
[11] MW, IV, p. 71n.

by representing the Fathers as fallible and the texts of both Testaments open to criticism. As Bossuet had seen and the Protestants heartily agreed, this was to leave authority vulnerable to the criticism Simon hoped to make its foundation; but the Protestant resort to Scripture alone must henceforth be a critical one. Among Le Clerc's early actions after reaching Amsterdam was to publish a treatise entitled *Sentiments de quelques théologiens de Hollande*, in which he sought to turn Simon to his own purposes by querying Moses's authorship of the Pentateuch. Simon's razor was a two-edged weapon, dangerous to brandish.[12]

The *Ars Critica* of 1697, a turning point in the mind of young Gibbon, appeared later in the history of controversy to which he addressed himself. In 1761, newly returned from Lausanne, he thought it the child of Descartes's critical method; but an acquaintance with 'autres de ses ouvrages' might have, perhaps may have, convinced him that it was rather a product of the widespread turn from Descartes to Locke. Finding the salary paid by the church of the Remonstrants at Amsterdam inadequate, Le Clerc turned to critical journalism (of which he was always slightly ashamed) and began to publish the *Bibliothèque universelle et historique*, the first of a series of periodicals he edited during his active life, in which the multi-national output of the *république des lettres* was excerpted, summarised and criticised. It is in this typographic context that his encounter with Locke and others, and the birth of his critical method, may be traced.

Le Clerc as critic, however, is equally an emanation from Le Clerc *journaliste*. Introducing the first volume of the *Bibliothèque universelle* in 1686, Le Clerc observed that

> deux ou trois livres, qui traitent une même matiere, ne suffisent pas pour tout le monde, et il n'est même pas possible, qu'ils tombent entre les mains de tous ceux à qui ils peuvent être utiles. Il en faut necessairement un plus grand nombre, pour en fournir l'Europe. La diversité de la méthode, qui est aussi differente que les goûts, sert encore beaucoup et à faire bien recevoir un ouvrage dont le sujet est déja connu, et à instruire même ceux qui veulent bien pénétrer quelque chose. La prodigieuse varieté qui se trouve entre les esprits, est cause que ce qui n'a fait aucune impression sur de certains lecteurs, en fait beaucoup sur les autres, que l'un trouve utile ce qui paroit tout à fait inutile au jugement d'un Lecteur de different goût, enfin que la moitié du monde regarde avec mépris ce qui l'autre admire, seulement à cause de la methode dont on s'est servi. Le public seroit donc bien malheureux, si on le contraignoit de se contenter d'un certain nombre de Livres, et de s'en rapporter uniquement aux Auteurs, qui ont traité les premiers un sujet.[13]

[12] As biography of Le Clerc, Barnes, 1938, remains unreplaced. For critical history, see Pitassi, 1987.
[13] BUH, 1968, 1, p. 8.

[Two or three books on the same subject are not enough for all readers, and it cannot even happen that they will fall into the hands of everyone who might profit by them. There must of necessity be a great number of them to meet the needs of all Europe. The diversity of method, which is as great as that of taste, also serves both to ensure a good reception for a work whose subject is already familiar, and to enlighten those who wish to penetrate it further. The prodigious variety which exists among intellects is the reason why what means nothing to some readers makes a deep impression on others, why one finds value in what appears useless to a reader of different tastes, and in short why half the world despises what the other admires; all this on account of the method originally adopted. The public would indeed be unfortunate if obliged to limit itself to a fixed number of books, and to consult only those authors who were the first to write on a subject.]

This is more than a regretful homily on the subjectivity of readership. Le Clerc does not state the limits of his 'Europe', but it doubtless extends as far as the saleable produce of the Amsterdam book industry; a little later he remarks that those who live at a distance do not receive all books, whereas those who live at the industry's centre cannot read all there are.[14] This material and social context, together with the instability of the human mind, ensures the uncontrollable diversity of both intention and reception, as well as of both *méthode* and *goût*, two words of such weight and richness as to defy translation. If *méthode*, especially since Descartes, had indicated the mind's organisation of itself as well as of its information, *goût* – we may recall how for Gibbon 'freedom' had become 'the happy parent of taste and science'[15] – meant how the mind organised itself to pursue some intentions rather than others. The two diversified one another, with the result that the republic of letters both suffered and demanded an inexhaustible variety of books and of ways of reading them. This formed part of the argument for toleration, but there was a price to be paid for it; the *journaliste*, who should be as impartial as a historian, could not escape making selections and might not be able to suppress his preferences. It meant also that the need of an *ars critica* was more pressing than ever; among an infinite variety of *goûts* and *méthodes*, it was urgently necessary to have means of distinguishing between them, of showing how each worked, what it was capable of achieving, and what it could not achieve and did not even attempt. From this starting point Le Clerc set out to make *la critique* an enterprise in philology.

It is two years later that we find him discovering its foundations in philosophy. He may have known John Locke since the latter's arrival in Amsterdam in 1683, but it was in July 1688 that Le Clerc wrote to him in the following terms:

[14] Ibid., p. 9. [15] DF, 1, ch. 2, the closing words; Womersley, 1994, 1, p. 84.

Je me persuade que pour être bon critique, il faut avoir consideré les langues d'une manière bien plus philosophique . . . Vôtre troisième Livre m'a beaucoup confirmé en diverses pensées que j'avois euës touchant la manière d'expliquer les écrits des Anciens, et m'a ouvert l'esprit pour faire attention à des choses où je n'avois pas assez pensé. Vous verrez dans le X Tome de la Bibliothèque, que je dois composer moi seul, si j'ai profité de vos idées . . . vous avez examiné les principes les plus abstraits de la science que j'entreprends de traiter. Je suis obligé de supposer tout ce que vous avez dit dans vôtre troisieme Livre comme démontré; parceque mon dessein n'est pas tant de donner les principes Métaphysiques de la Critique, que de reduire ces Principes en pratique. C'est ce que j'ai tâché de faire dans le petit Discours que vous verrez dans ce volume.[16]

[I am persuaded that to be a good critic, one must consider languages in a far more philosophical manner . . . Your third volume has done much to confirm me in various thoughts I have had concerning the way to explain the writings of the Ancients, and has opened my mind to matters I had not considered enough. You will see in the tenth volume of my *Bibliothèque*, which I must write entirely by myself, whether I have profited from your ideas . . . You have examined the most abstract principles of the discipline I undertake to consider. I am obliged to take all you have said in your third volume as proved, since my enterprise is not so much to present the metaphysical principles of criticism as to reduce them to practice. This is what I have attempted in the little essay you will find in my volume.]

The most recent study of Locke's impact on the theory of language makes no reference to this letter;[17] but if of little importance to Locke, it was of central significance to Le Clerc. The 1687 volume of the *Bibliothèque universelle* had contained a *précis* and preview of Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*,[18] and that of 1688 contained the *petit discours* mentioned in this letter – under the title 'Regles de Critique pour l'intelligence des Anciens Auteurs' – together with other essays crucial to Le Clerc's project. We have before us the origins of the *Ars Critica* nine years later, but it is of greater importance to this chapter that Le Clerc's critical approach to Christian history is about to make a new start. The 'Anciens' he mentions are as much the primitive Christians and the Fathers of the Church as they are the poets and orators of classical antiquity; and we have here a linguistic and philosophical growth point for the vehement critical assault on the Fathers that Le Clerc began to develop. If the mind could study only its own ideas, a text could contain only the history of its own composition. This was how to read the Fathers, but the Fathers had not known it.

This *critique* can be traced back to Locke and 1688. In the 'Regles de Critique' of that year we read:

[16] Bonno, 1959, pp. 33–4; cf. BUH, 1968, II, p. 478.
[17] Dawson, 2007; the only mention of Le Clerc is on p. 36.
[18] BUH, 1968, II, pp. 456–79.

Premierement il faut bien savoir la Langue, dans laquelle l'Auteur qui l'on lit a écrit. J'appelle *savoir bien une Langue*, être en état d'avoir, en la lisant, ou en l'entendant parler, précisément les mêmes idées dans l'esprit, que ceux qui parlent, ou qui ont écrit leurs pensées, ont attachées aux sons dont ils se servent.[19]

[In the first place one must truly know the language in which the author one is reading wrote. By *knowing a language* I mean being possessed, when we read it or hear it spoken, of exactly the same ideas in the mind as those who are speaking, or have written their thoughts, attached to the sounds they were using.]

On doit se souvenir qu'il ne s'agit pas ici d'apprendre quelle est la nature des choses en elles-mêmes, et ce qui est veritable; mais simplement de savoir, aussi exactement qu'il est possible, quelle pensée une autre personne a, lorsqu'elle prononce de certaines paroles, soit que cette pensée soit juste, ou fausse. Il ne faut donc point trop faire d'attention aux idées que nous avons nousmêmes des choses, que nous voions que l'on veut marquer par de certains mots, mais tâcher de découvrir, s'il est possible, par quelques indices certains, les idées que ceux qui parlent y ont attachées.[20]

[One must bear in mind that it is not a matter of knowing the nature of things in themselves and what is the truth about them, but simply of knowing, as closely as possible, what are the thoughts another has when he utters certain words, whether that thought be true or false. One must not, then, pay too much attention to the ideas we have of the things we see indicated by certain words; we must try to discover, if this is possible, by some clear indication, the ideas which those speakers attached to those words.]

Le Clerc cannot be accused of supposing that we could *simplement* rethink the thoughts of another. This is the point at which Gibbon was to observe that 'the nobler faculties of imagination and judgment'[21] came into play; but Le Clerc, who would not have disagreed, had a more technical problem in mind. There was the difficulty that in reading and interpreting the 'ancients' we used language continuous with theirs, which had nevertheless undergone change in the course of time, so that it now indicated ideas not identical with those it had conveyed when they used it. He went on to explore this difficulty, and in doing so uncovered the central event in the history of language as he saw it. There was, he said,

une chose que l'on néglige extrémement, et qui est de la derniere conséquence, pour entendre bien ce qu'on lit. C'est qu'il pourroit être arrivé qu'encore que l'on se soit toûjours servi de certains termes parmi les Chrétiens, on se fût eloigné insensiblement des idées que ceux qui s'en sont les premiers servis y avoient attachées, et que les mots demeurant les mêmes, le sens qu'on leur a attribué eût souffert diverses révolutions. Les manières de parler étant écrites dans quantité de

[19] Ibid., III, p. 236. [20] Ibid., III, p. 237. [21] EEG, p. 141; A, p. 167.

livres, sur du papier, ou sur du parchemin, en caracteres sensibles, n'ont pu souffrir si grandes alterations; mais les idées étant des choses qu'on ne voit point, et leurs productions, leurs anéantissemens, et leurs differens changemens se passant dans l'esprit de chaque homme, qui est invisible à tous les autres, et que nous ne faisons nous mêmes que sentir, il est difficile de deviner ce qui y est arrivé, par le seul secours de sons équivoques . . . Bien des mots sont peutêtre comme les anciens caracteres des Chinois, qui se laissent pas d'être les mêmes depuis trois milles ans, quoi que les sons, dont ils sont les signes, aient necessairement changé dans la succession de tant de siecles.[22]

[something almost wholly neglected, which is of the utmost consequence in the proper understanding of what we read. It may have happened that while certain terms have always been in use among Christians, we have unconsciously moved away from the ideas which their first users attached to them, and that the words have remained the same while the meanings we read into them have been in many ways transformed. Speech usages, which have been written into many books, both on paper and on parchment, in visible characters have not undergone much alteration; but ideas are things we do not see, and their appearance, disappearance and transformation goes on in the consciousness of the individual, which is invisible to his neighbours; and because we can only sense what happens there, it is difficult to imagine it by the sole aid of equivocal sounds . . . Many words, it may be, are like the ancient characters of the Chinese, which have remained the same for three thousand years, although the sounds of which they are the signs have necessarily changed in the passing of so many centuries.]

When Le Clerc mentioned *l'esprit de chaque homme*, he might well have brought in the *goûts* and *méthodes* whose enormous diversity had figured in his writing two years earlier. The history of meanings was becoming too vast and elusive to be comprehended in any narrative, let alone reduced to a single one; but a megacultural transformation affecting all language and all its users had appeared with the introduction of the word 'Christians'. Those to whom it applied had used the Greek and Latin of their polytheist and philosophical forebears, but used it very differently, meaning by its words (above all the word *deus*) what they had never meant before; but the emphasis in his passage falls rather on changes within the Christian vocabulary, hard to recapture from the written word because they came about in the unrecorded speech or the silent reflection of the individual – perhaps the ordinary or common individual whose responses could never be recovered. And Christians had used language to declare that things had happened, at the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, which had changed the entire human universe and the meanings of language in it; they had, for example, used the written word to declare that the

[22] BUH, 1968, III, pp. 242–3.

Word – if *logos* might be translated as *verbum* – had been made Flesh and dwelt among us. Le Clerc was not far from proclaiming that we might, with difficulty, trace the changing meanings of what Christians had meant to say when they said this, but that we could not know that which they claimed to know when they said it. He was, in fact, on the brink of effecting a linguistic turn. We have to realise that he was speaking to Christians about Christians when, nine years after publishing the above passages, he wrote in the Latin and Greek of the *Ars Critica*:

> Dicitur KPITIKH quod ejus ope judicemus de sensu dictorum, atque aetate scribentium.[23]
>
> [We call criticism the judgements which with its aid we form concerning the meaning of statements and the age in which writers lived.]
>
> [N]on attingit Grammaticas Regulas, quae sunt sermonis elementa; sed eas jam notas esse legentibus statuit. Neque etiam rerum ipsarum cognitionem suppeditat, sed viam tantum aperuit, ad intelligendum eorum sermonem, quid de rebus egerunt. Haud magis quaeritur hic quid verum sit, quid falsum, seu an id quod legimus veritate consentaneum, necne; sed tantum qui possimus intelligere quid sibi velint ii, quorum scripta legimus. Uno verbo, quaeritur vera dictorum sententia, non veritas eorum quae dicentur, licet huic illa facem saepe praeferat; cum, nempe, Scriptor, quem intelligimus, veritatem assequutus est.[24]
>
> [It does not concern the rules of grammar, which are the elements of discourse, but it confirms that these were known to readers. Nor does it furnish knowledge of things themselves, but merely opens the way to understanding the language of those who speak of things. Still less does it enquire what is true or false, or whether what we are reading is or is not consonant with the truth; merely whether we can understand what those whose writings we are reading understood themselves to mean. In a word, it seeks the true meaning of statements, not the truth of what they affirm, though its light may often be glimpsed; that is, when the writer we are studying was in pursuit of truth.]

But if the meanings of words give no access to the truth about things, what access is there to the latter? It would be possible to read the last passage as if it were written by Denis the Areopagite, or any Christian mystic asserting that God was never anything that could be said about him, but always something beyond speech. On that reading, or any approach to it, Le Clerc must sooner or later confront the question of what speech should say about God; alternatively, of what had happened in history when statements had been made about him.

[23] Le Clerc, 1698a, p. 1. [24] Ibid., p. 2.

(III) *THE NAKED GOSPEL* AND THE POLEMIC AGAINST THE FATHERS

The proto-Skinnerian Le Clerc we have brought to light was able to say that no statement could be made other than the language of its time permitted, though this allowed of a possibly unmanageable wealth of meanings. He said this in consequence of a Lockean theory of knowledge which insisted that we could know only our thoughts concerning an object of knowledge, but that the object itself could never be known directly. What did this entail when the object in question was either God himself or Jesus Christ of whom it was said that he was God incarnate among men? Concerning the latter it was not in question that he had made himself known in the human world to the end of human salvation. What was in question was how this could be known, as distinct from proclaimed, or rather believed; and in the latter case, what were the relations between knowledge and belief – *entre croire et savoir*, as a recent study of Le Clerc has put it.[25] Le Clerc's linguistic turn could not but widen the gap between the two; but was not the historisation of knowledge subversive of belief, by reducing it to language and history?

The known history of the Church, agreed on by all, displayed a tendency to identify belief with knowledge. No sooner had Christ's salvific message begun to be preached than there had appeared doctrines of his nature – whether the work of Simon Magus or of the unidentified teachers Paul had found at Corinth and Colossae – that seemed incompatible with his role as the Apostles were held to have presented it. The question arose of how far a correct understanding of his nature – clearly a matter of knowledge – was necessary to the salvation or redemption that followed from belief in him. In what sense could he be known, independently of an intellectual comprehension of his nature? The Gospels seemed to say much of his words and actions, even of the mysteries of his birth and death, without – excepting only the opening words of the Gospel of St John – propounding a view of his nature, so that it was possible to speak of a simple gospel; that is to say, one devoid of theology. There was, however, a historical narrative, lying outside the canon, which related how even the Gospels (particularly John's) had been written to declare his true nature against mainly gnostic heresies. The simple gospel could never be made entirely unmysterious, and might come to depend on the thesis that Christ's nature transcended anything the intellect might say about it; a thesis in itself not simple.

[25] Pitassi, 1987.

Opposing churches, in Le Clerc's time, were open to varying degrees of anti-clericalism. Protestants denounced the Roman clergy as introjecting themselves and their false doctrines between the Christian and the Scriptures; those of an Enlightened tendency feared any clergy – perhaps any clergy at all – which seemed to exalt ecclesiastical authority above civil. The theology of Nicaea came under pressure, if not outright attack, from both quarters; yet even those who reduced Christ's teaching to a civil theology must affirm his character as a being beyond nature and perfecting it. There were those, apparently more radical, who condemned all theological dispute, Nicene or otherwise, as a means of exalting the authority of the clergy; yet even these must have something to say about Christ if they wished to remain Christians at all. Those subject to this dilemma had more to say about the history of church and doctrine than those who escaped it into unbelief; but writing that history might be a means of going to the brink of unbelief, as it seems Gibbon did.

Christ himself, and initially the Apostles, were immune from Le Clerc's linguistic criticism; the Word they spoke might transcend the stumbling blocks and foolishness of language. The linguistic turn focused attack on Gibbon's 'uninspired teachers', those who had transmitted the Word after the Apostles – though there was room for the argument that divine action had persisted even among them. They were the Fathers before Constantine, and less immediately but more crucially the Councils after him; had either group spoken truth or corrupted the Word by unmeaning dispute? Here we find Le Clerc's historicity of language extending to the possibility that words might lose meaning altogether. Hobbes's 'frequency of insignificant speech' becomes – though he does not cite Hobbes – Le Clerc's *voces quibus nulla subjecta est potestas*. This is from the *Ars Critica* in 1697; as early as 1688 he had written:

> En lisant les Anciens, on fait souvent inutilement effort, pour deviner ce qu'ils ont voulu marquer par de certains mots, ou de certaines manières de parler, parce qu'en effet euxmêmes ne savoient ce qu'ils vouloient dire; et cela leur est arrivé particulièrement dans les discours les plus animez. Alors l'imagination échauffée ébranle si violemment le cerveau, que les paroles, qui sortent de la bouche comme un torrent, se ressentent du trouble de l'esprit, non seulement en ce qu'elles ne sont pas dans l'ordre, où elles devoient être, mais encore en ce qu'elles ne représentent aucune idée, étant plûtôt sorties de la bouche, que l'on n'a pensé ce que l'on doit dire.[26]
>
> [In reading the ancients, it is often in vain that we struggle to divine what they meant by certain words or patterns of speech, since they themselves did not know

[26] BUH, 1968, III, p. 244.

what they wanted to say; and this was especially the case when their discourse was at its most intense. At such times a heated imagination burst so violently through the brain that words rushing from the mouth like a torrent were the effect of a disturbance in the intellect, not only because they were not in due order, but because they represented no idea, being rather ejected from the mouth than the fruit of reflection on what one ought to say.]

Nonsense here is the source of enthusiasm; the imagination is stimulated by its own ignorance and begets more words to express the absence of meaning. What the ancients began the moderns have continued.

Si l'on examinoit, avec une rigueur Philosophique, la plûpart des Auteurs Anciens, et modernes, combien d'endroits ne trouveroit-on pas, qui ne contiennent que de purs mots, ausquels on n'a jamais attaché aucune idée? Il y en auroit d'avantage, où l'on verroit que les mots ne sont les signes que de quelque idée extrémement confusé. Chacun peut s'en convaincre soi-même, en . . . se demandant à lui-même, ce que chaque phrase signifie? . . . Ceux qui essaieront cela sur la plûpart des livres de cette nature, s'appercevront, que de gros volumes contiennent beaucoup plus de mots qui ne représentent aucune idée, ou qui n'en ont que de très-confuses attachées à leur son; que de mots qui marquent des idées distinctes. On n'a qu'à ouvrir un Philosophe, ou un Theologien Scholastique, et l'on verra peutêtre avec étonnement, que des personnes celébres ont passé leur vie à dire, comme des perroquets, je ne sai quels sons, qu'ils entendoient aussi peu que ces oiseaux entendent les paroles qu'ils prononcent.[27]

[If one examined with philosophic rigour the greater part of authors both ancient and modern, how many passages would one find that contained only mere words to which no idea had ever been attached? There would be even more in which it would be seen that the words were only the signs of some idea altogether confused. Anyone may assure himself of this . . . by asking himself what any word or phrase may signify . . . Those who apply this method to the greater part of books of this sort will soon see how many mighty tomes contain more words that express no idea, or none but confused notions attached to the sound of them, than words marking distinct notions. One need only open some scholastic philosopher or theologian to observe, perhaps with amazement, that famous men have passed their lives like parrots, uttering noises they understand no better than these birds do the words they pronounce.]

In the *Ars Critica* this has become:

Imo, quod paradoxum videatur, haud pauca sunt vocabula apud Veteres, uti et apud Recentiores quae, non dicam obscuram, sed nullam potestam subjectam habent, non secus quam Aristophanum ΦλαττοθραττοΦλαττοθρατ. Deprehendimus homines saepe hoc usum in sermonem spectare, non ut notiones quas mentibus suis observantur, dum loquuntur, exprimant; sed ut certas voces in certis circumstantiis, instar Psittacorum, aut Gracculorum, pronuncient. Hoc observare

[27] Ibid., III, p. 245.

est potissimum in vocabulis quibusdam, quae grandia occultare mysteria, qualia sunt vocabula *Transubstantiationis*, *Praesentia corporis*, *non naturalis*, *sed sacramentalis*, *Ubiquitatis humanae naturae Christi*, *etc*. Quae asserimus, non quasi sola, sed quasi eximia quaedam exempla vocabulorum nihil significantium.[28]

[Indeed, though it may seem a paradox, there are no few words found among both ancients and moderns, that are not merely obscure, but convey no meaning whatever, any more than the *flattothrattoflattothrat* of Aristophanes. We often find men using language not to express the ideas perceived in their minds while they speak, but to utter certain sounds on certain occasions, in the manner of parrots or jackdaws. This is most forcibly to be observed in words designed to conceal great mysteries, such as *transubstantiation*, *the body's presence not natural but sacramental*, *the ubiquity of Christ's human nature*, and so on. We note these as not the only, but the most remarkable instances of words having no meaning.]

There is more here than the humanist invective against scholasticism, or the Protestant invective against the Mass; more even than the Hobbesian invective against the Platonic belief in immaterial substances. Le Clerc is not a philosopher propounding an Epicurean materialism; he is a philologist and critic following up the Lockean principle that we can know only what we think, never what there is to be thought about. This principle has now encountered God, of whom it must be said that he exists beyond anything we can possibly say or think about him. In the volume of the *Bibliothèque universelle* mentioned to Locke, a little before the 'Regles de Critique', Le Clerc had summarised a work by the English divine Isaac Barrow, and had said that God

existe tout autrement que tout ce que nous voions, et que nous connoissons en quelque sorte, ce qui fait qu'aiant formé nos idées sur ces choses, et accommodé notre langage à nos idées, nous ne pouvons lui appliquer les maximes, que nous avons établies sur nos connoissances, sans nous brouiller; ni nous servir des termes que nous avons, sans tomber dans de grandes improprietez. *Il est très difficile*, dit Platon dans son *Timée*, de trouver *l'Auteur et le Pere de cet Univers*, *et aprés l'avoir trouvé, il est impossible d'en instruire tout le monde*.

There is need of some

réflexion sur la connoissance que nous avons des choses spirituelles. Quoi que nous ne puissions pas douter de leur existence, et que nous connoissions quelques-unes de leurs proprietez, nous ne saurions comprendre comment elles sont unies aux corps, comment elles les remuënt sans mains et sans machines; ni comment les corps de leur côté agissent sur les esprits, sans les toucher. Il se peut faire encore que les choses spirituelles aient des proprietez, qui nous sont absolument inconnuës.

[28] Le Clerc, 1698a, p. 6.

A l'egard de Dieu, qui est non seulement spirituel, mais encore infini, nous nous trouvons dans un embarras infiniment plus grand.[29]

[God exists quite otherwise than we can see, or know in any manner, with the result that since we have formed our ideas about things, and adjusted our language to our ideas, we cannot apply to God the concepts we have based upon our knowledge without becoming confused, or make use of the terminology we have without falling into gross errors. 'It is very difficult', says Plato in his *Timaeus*, 'to arrive at the author and father of this universe, and when we have found him, it is impossible to explain him to everyone.'

(There is therefore need of some) reflection on the knowledge we have of spiritual things. Though we may not doubt their existence, and have some knowledge of their properties, we are unable to understand how they are united with bodies, how they move them without hands or tools, or how bodies act upon spirits without touching them. It may even be that spiritual forces have properties to us absolutely unknown. As to God, who is not only spiritual but infinite, our incomprehension is infinitely greater.]

A study of how the Lockean intelligence has applied itself to God can be no more than a history of the statements that have been made about him and the language in which they have been formulated; but it is the case that this is the history of attempts to do what language cannot do, that is to perceive God and describe him. Such a history must be largely a history of statements which have no meaning beyond what they meant to their authors.

Ceux qui veulent tirer quelque consequence de l'autorité des Anciens, comme fait nôtre Auteur, devroient entrer dans la discussion de ces deux choses; rechercher exactement l'origine des termes, dont on s'est servi; etudier la Philosophie de ces temps-là, que les Anciens ont suivie; et tâcher simplement d'entendre ce que les Peres ont voulu dire, sans se mettre en peine s'ils se trouvoient conformes à nos sentimens d'aujourd'hui. Sans cela on ne sauroit s'assurer, si les Peres ont été pour, ou contre nous. Peut-être que si M. Barrow eût vécu, et eût publié lui-même sa Dissertation, il auroit eu égard de tout cela.[30]

[Those who wish to draw conclusions from the authority of the ancients, as does our author, must enter upon these two pursuits. They must enquire after the exact meaning of the terms then used; study the philosophy of those times which the ancients followed; and try simply to understand what the Fathers meant to say, without troubling themselves whether they were in accordance with our opinions today. Without this there is no knowing whether the Fathers were with us or against us. Perhaps, if Dr Barrow had lived to publish his own dissertation, he would have attended to these matters.]

[29] BUH 1968, III, p. 165. [30] Ibid., III, p. 167.

There might here have taken shape a charitable reading of the Fathers, as men dazed and appalled by the magnitude of what they must attempt; but Le Clerc – whether as Protestant tracing the rise of a clergy ultimately Roman, or as freethinker engaged in a polemic against priestcraft – prefers to condemn them as both arrogant and foolish, both dogmatists and enthusiasts. What – the question must arise – did he himself think of the foolishness of the Pauline Word? Meanwhile, his invective continued through the 1690s. As early as 1688, he wrote:

> Si l'on demande présentement quelles idées ils attachoient à ces expressions? on ne peut pas assurer qu'elles aient été claires; premiérement, parce que quelque effort qu'on fasse pour entendre ce qu'ils veulent dire, on ne peut s'en former aucune idée nette; et secondement, parce qu'ils avoüent eux mêmes que c'est une chose incomprehensible. Tout ce qu'on peut donc faire en cette occasion, c'est de rapporter les termes dont ils se sont servis, afin que l'on voie comment on s'est exprimé autrefois sur cette mattére. Cependant de savans hommes se sont donnez beaucoup de peine à expliquer les passages des Peres, qui ont vécu avant le Concile de Nicée, sans penser que toutes leurs explications sont inutiles; puis que les Peres en avoüant que ce qu'ils disoient étoit incomprehensible, avoüoient en même temps que ce qu'ils n'attachoient point d'idée aux termes dont ils se servoient, si ce n'est des idées fort génerales et fort confusés.[31]

A near contemporary English translation was:

> If it be demanded at present, what ideas they fixt to these Expressions, it cannot be affirm'd that they have been clear; First, because whatever endeavours are used to understand what they say, a man can get no distinct Notion thereof; and secondly, because they acknowledge themselves, that it is a thing incomprehensible. All that can be done on this occasion, is to relate the Terms which they have used, to the end that it may be seen, how they heretofore expressed themselves on this matter. However, learned Men have given themselves a great deal of trouble to explain the Passages of the Fathers who lived before the Council of *Nice*, without considering that all their Explications are fruitless; seeing the Fathers, in acknowledging that what they said was incomprehensible, acknowledged at the same time, that they fix'd no idea on the Terms they used, unless such as were general and confused.[32]

Whereof they could not speak, thereof should they have been silent? But was God's inexpressibility itself a silence, or a Word past the capacities of speech? This was to be the issue raised by the history of gnosticism. Meanwhile, more than a decade later, in the English translation of Le Clerc's *Parrhasiana*, we find the following:

[31] Ibid., III, p. 262.

[32] [Le Clerc], 1690a, p. 20; cf. [Le Clerc] 1701, p. 91. The name of Le Clerc is bracketed when the reference is to contemporary English translations of his works, which he may or may not have approved.

With this Fault [Obscurity], we may justly charge the greatest part of the *Greek* and *Latin* Fathers, who are almost perpetually upon the Harangue, and who avoid clear and proper Expressions with as much care as the Athenian Orators sought after them. Thus everything almost is disguis'd and swell'd in their Writings, in so extraordinary a manner that a Man has all the difficulty in the World to understand them, when they treat of a Subject which is somewhat obscure in itself. Sometimes they carry Matters so extravagantly high that one cannot tell whether they talk seriously, or have a mind only to impose upon the Populace. This in truth was the Fault of the Times as well as of the men, for the Eloquence of those Ages was extremely different from that of the ancient Orders, either *Athenian* or *Roman*, as a Woman that is loaded and encumbred with superfluity of Habits is from one in a modest Garb. Thus we must excuse this Fault in them, but we ought to take care not to imitate them in it.[33]

And elsewhere, with even greater finality:

'Tis an ill effect of the continual Rhetoric of most of the Ancients: They are so eloquent, that they can't be understood.[34]

What then was the history of the Church under the reign of unmeaning speech, and what became of the truths it should have conveyed? In 1690 there occurred in England an incident that raised these questions, together with the question of how Le Clerc might answer them. Arthur Bury, the rector of Exeter College in Oxford, published a book called *The Naked Gospel*,[35] and when his authorship became known, was excommunicated and deprived of his office by the college visitor, Trelawney bishop of Exeter. Le Clerc received a copy of the book from Benjamin Furly, the distributor of much unorthodox literature,[36] and paraphrased it at length in the *Bibliothèque universelle et historique*.[37] Bury and Le Clerc considered two historical questions in which Gibbon was to be deeply interested: the spread of Christianity in the first two centuries (Gibbon's chapter 15) and its almost global defeats by Islam in the seventh century (Gibbon's chapter 50).[38] They attributed the first to the preaching of the Word, to which neither Jews nor Greeks (especially polytheists) had had an answer; the second to the corruption of the Word by the falsities of human language, converting it into theological disputes which were unending, and had confused Christian congregations to the point where the Prophet (of whom Bury held a low opinion) could present himself as a liberator.[39] This corruption had been

[33] [Le Clerc], 1700, pp. 7, 83. [34] [Le Clerc], 1690a, p. 194. [35] [Bury], 1690.
[36] Bonno, 1959, pp. 44–5, see also p. 98; Marshall, 1994, p. 389.
[37] BUH, 1968, v, pp. 107–20. [38] [Bury], 1690, preface, sig. A3r–v; BUH, 1968, iv, pp. 107–9.
[39] [Bury], 1690, ibid. He says it is a question whether Muhammad corrupted the gospel more grossly than did the Christian theologians. Cf. Marshall, 2006, pp. 390, 392.

initially the work of 'gnostics', less the dualists described by Irenaeus than the false teachers mentioned in Paul's Epistles, some of whom claimed an esoteric knowledge (*gnōsis)* of what the Christian message meant.[40] Subsequently – and here we approach the reign of Constantine and the Council of Nicaea – it had been the work of over-articulate clerics at Alexandria, who had needlessly debated whether or not the Word or Logos spoken of by St John was consubstantial with the Father. No reader of Bury's *The Naked Gospel* can have been unaware that the roots of this dispute lay in Plato's *Timaeus*, or that the controversy between Arius, Alexander and Athanasius was the culmination of a process, initiated by Justin Martyr, whereby Platonic philosophy had been called in to explain the meaning of the Fourth Gospel – if indeed that Gospel's opening chapter were not the moment of Platonic infection of the Christian Word. The Naked Gospel was therefore that Word before Platonists, and before them gnostics, had corrupted it by imposing meanings that were merely the constructions of human intellect and (Le Clerc at least would add) human language. The invective against the Fathers now took over.

Le Clerc at this point[41] mentioned, while summarising Bury at length in the *Bibliothèque*, two essays of his own, presenting the lives of Eusebius of Caesarea and Gregory Nazianzen, of which the former had appeared in that journal's 1688 volume,[42] in close proximity to the 'Regles de Critique' which apply Locke's philosophy to the practice of philology. This life of Eusebius, in truncated form, was rapidly translated into English and appeared, dated 1690, under the title *A Historical Vindication of the Naked Gospel*,[43] and both lives, together with those of Clement of Alexandria and the Christian poet Prudentius,[44] were published in English editions of 1696 and 1701, by which time they had acquired the title *Lives of the Primitive Fathers*.[45] It was also in 1690 that part of Le Clerc's *Sentiments de quelques thèologiens de Hollande*, the work resulting from his reading of Richard Simon, appeared in English as an anonymous *Five Letters Concerning the Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures*: *Translated out of French*.[46]

Le Clerc's English connections, the identity of his translators, and the extent to which he was party to whatever they intended, deserve further investigation; this was by no means the end of his appearances in English. It is clear that, from 1690, any churchman aware of the links between

[40] [Bury], 1690, sig. A3, p. 2. [41] BUH, 1968, v, p. 113.
[42] Ibid., III, pp. 254–83. That of Gregory Nazianzen is in ibid., v, pp. 7–39. [43] [Le Clerc], 1690a.
[44] Life of Clement in BUH, 1968, III, pp. 203–20; note its relation to the life of Eusebius and the 'Regles de Critique' (pp. 236–54) and that of Eusebius. Life of Prudentius, pp. 495–509.
[45] [Le Clerc], 1696, 1701. [46] [Le Clerc], 1690b.

the *Bibliothèque universelle* and the *Naked Gospel* would regard him as the instrument or agent of an anti-Nicene faction in the Trinitarian controversy going on in the Church of England. Bury and Le Clerc both regarded – as would Gibbon – the Arian controversy and the Council of Nicaea as a crucial episode in early ecclesiastical history; it occurred after the accession of Constantine, and there remained the question how far the preceding centuries could be reduced to its prehistory. Le Clerc certainly knew the writings of George Bull, bishop of St Davids, devoted to the claim that the Nicene theology had been generally accepted in the age before the Council;[47] but Bury, with Le Clerc's support, was making the 'naked', i.e. the uncorrupted, gospel the vehicle of a non-Nicene understanding of Christ. This tended to make the adversaries of Arius, even more than Arius himself, the agents of confusion and corruption. 'It was about this time', wrote Le Clerc, 'that *Alexander*, Bishop of *Alexandria*, had a bickering (in French, "eut un demélé") with one of his priests named *Arius*',[48] as if the bishop, not the deacon, had initiated the controversy; and Bury, like Hobbes, is full of praise for 'the good emperor' Constantine for his letters urging Alexander to let the matter rest.[49] There is something not quite neutral in Bury's suggestion that one

> may be tempted to number the *Athanasian* among the *Roman* Doctrines, and cannot but think it fairly dealt with, if (its boasted possession pardoned) it be left upon the same level with the *Arian*, equally unworthy, not only of our Faith, but of our Study.[50]

Oxford would be content with nothing not Athanasian, but this contempt for the opponents of Arius is not a sign of support for his doctrine, though there were English Arians – Isaac Newton among them – for whom Athanasius was something of a demon figure. Arianism, even in the eighteenth century, was often a Platonic doctrine, the persisting belief that the Word must be the creation of the Father; but an equal contempt for Arius and Athanasius usually signified a rejection of Platonic thinking and an insistence that the nature and person of Christ, if thought about at all, must remain, at least in this world, perpetually open to discussion. The accepted term for this position was 'Socinian'; it was in this sense that Archbishop Tillotson was accused of 'Socinianism' and John Locke came

[47] Bull, 1685. For an English translation, see [Bull], 1725. He is mentioned from time to time in the *Bibliothèques*, but not reviewed at length; it is usually implied that his search for an ante-Nicene Trinitarianism is in vain, since thought at that time was indeterminate.

[48] [Le Clerc], 1690a, p. 4; 1701, p. 67; BUH, 1968, III, p. 255.

[49] [Bury], 1690, pp. 32–3; Hobbes, 2008, passim. [50] [Bury], 1690, pp. 38–9.

close to adopting it.[51] Jean Le Clerc, who knew what the two Sozzini had actually taught, had no difficulty in pointing out that the term had become an uncritical condemnation of anyone who applied a programme of research into the history of theology;[52] but he had been foremost in demonstrating that the study of texts must remain a history of language, and could never arrive at a solution of the problems the users of language had debated. This was above all true of those who had debated the nature of God, the nature of his Word and the nature of Christ.

It would be easy, and would not within limits be false, to present the Naked Gospel of Bury and Le Clerc as a set of propositions about Christ as accessible to the untutored intellect, to which the sophistication of theology could add only confusion;[53] but this is not to say that Jesus Christ was a simple phenomenon. There had been his miracles, his death, resurrection and ascension; there had been the extraordinary nature of his language about himself, leading – if one were indeed not a Socinian – to the possibility that the ultimate truth about him was not what he had taught but what he was. To go back to the Naked Gospel could be to encounter this person, in the word concerning him; but Le Clerc had raised the question whether the Word that was God could be expressed in the words of human speech. Yet that was what Christ at his ascension, and the Holy Ghost at Pentecost, had charged the Apostles with doing and (in the latter case) empowered them to do. What then had they said, and what then was the Christian to learn from them?

Arthur Bury had given his answer, in terms which indicated that the apparently sceptical and the openly evangelical responses might lie close together. In the *Naked Gospel* he had written:

> This is the sum of the Promises given by our Lord to such as believe in him. He that so believeth in Him as the Traveller doth in the Light, shall in the end as certainly attain Eternal Life, as the Traveller doth his Journey's end; though concerning our Lord's Person, he be as much mistaken, as the Ignorant, but Industrious Traveller, who knoweth nothing of the Greatness of the Sun's Body, or the Nature of its Light. For as the End when Accomplished, justified the Means to be Sufficient: so a Divine Life justified the Faith that Worketh it, and the Person that Hath it.[54]

Bury proceeds to explain that what we need to know of Christ is the words that he spoke to us, which we accept because of our faith in his person. As a doctrine of justification, this leans to the Socinian; and the

[51] For Locke and Socinianism, see Marshall, 1994, esp. pp. 415–27, and 2001.
[52] [Le Clerc], 1699, 'Letter', pp. i–xx.
[53] Sullivan, 1982, pp. 69–71; Marshall, 1994, pp. 389–92, 2006, pp. 390, 392.
[54] [Bury], 1690, pp. 39–40.

English translation of Le Clerc's writings on the Testaments, published in the same year, contains the even more Socinian remarks that Christ is 'a Teacher sent from Heaven' and 'we may be perfectly assured of the Truth of Christianity without believing the History of the New Testament to be inspir'd'.[55] The history the Testament contains, or the history of the Testament itself? We shall find Conyers Middleton using the same language. But Bury's language just quoted advocates a simple decision to accept Christ as divine, which preceded and may render indifferent any definition of his divinity which human discourse can construct. To Bury's (and Le Clerc's) contemporaries the refusal to define might imply a definition less than the Nicene or Athanasian doctrine of consubstantiality, and there are good grounds for thinking both men 'Socinian' in that sense (bearing in mind that it is not 'Socinian' in the precise sense). But to define Christ otherwise than as of God's substance, or to decline defining him at all, was not incompatible with an unqualified devotion to his person; the critical approach to *sola scriptura* might end in a confrontation, but not a choice, between the rational and the evangelical, and both ways of seeing Christ emerged intact from this early Enlightenment. But the Christ accepted without definition was the Christ perceived by the Apostles, and even after the theology invented by the Fathers had been dismissed, there remained the questions of what the Apostles had seen and how, and of the language in which they had reported it.

(iv) Richard Simon: the Gospels as cultural hybrids

The words and deeds of Christ in his life had been reported by simple men testifying to what they had seen and heard; but the realisation that he was the Messiah, the Son of God and the Word made Flesh had foundations beyond the evidence of the senses. However received, these revelations must be stated in human language, and here there arose the question of the Greek in which the received canon was available. Tillemont and Fleury had discussed the purity of the Greek style of both Paul and John, and this is a point at which the *ars critica* became theologically significant. The characteristic of Greek was its clarity, but the Christian Word had been 'to the Greeks foolishness'; was this because it was mysterious and unclear, or because it revealed something beyond the capacity of language to express? If the latter, what of the attempt to put it into words? In the uninspired Fathers, the attempt might lead to unmeaning nonsense, or to

[55] [Le Clerc], 1690b, pp. 239, 257.

the intoxication of enthusiasm; but what was to be said of the language of the Apostles and Evangelists themselves? Here one stood on the brink of more chasms than one. Since the time of Erasmus, what Gibbon called 'the corrupt dialect of the Hellenist Jews'[56] had presented the New Testament as a problem in cultural hybridity. The Apostles' Greek was impure because they were thinking as Hebrews. Did this mean that the attempt to define the nature of Christ was an accidental consequence of the mingling of Greek and Jewish converts once the Mission to the Gentiles had begun, and if so, was the problem of that nature accidental rather than essential to the spreading of the Word? Did the proposition that the Word had been made Flesh present a challenge that the intellect must take up, or simply a challenge to faith's capacity to believe? Justin Martyr had faced this problem, and could be accused of passing from the clarity of philosophy to the incoherence of enthusiasm; but the problem of New Testament Greek involved the Apostles themselves in the same danger. Here was a brink the *ars critica* found it difficult not to step over.

We can pursue the point by comparing – as Le Clerc had opportunity to do – the original French with the English translation of Richard Simon's *Histoire critique du texte du Nouveau Testament* in editions of 1689. It will be remembered that debate over Simon's reading of the Old Testament was one starting point of Le Clerc's intellectual career. Part of the head of chapter 27 of the later work runs:

> De la langue Hellenistique. S'il y a en effet une langage qui porte ce nom,[57]

which in English becomes

> Of the language of the Hellenists or Grecians; if that which bears that name be, in effect, a Language,[58]

a slight but significant shift of emphasis. Simon had begun to debate the question – by no means unfamiliar in Catholic as well as Protestant scholarship – whether Paul's departures from Greek purity occurred as he began to express truths to which the Greek intellect was still unequal, and whether these truths were both simple and inexpressible, so that language was confused by its own imperfections in its attempts to express them. The style of the Apostles might be corrupt to the point of nonsensicality, but this did not mean that the mysteries it failed to convey were themselves nonsense. Something, however, had to be done to purify their dialect, and here Simon had recourse to the tradition of the Church, assured of its

[56] A, p. 141 (Memoir B). [57] Simon, 1689, p. 220. [58] [Simon], 1689, II, p. 94.

infallibility and competent to clarify the meanings of the Apostles and correct the errors of the Fathers. The fallibility of the canon acted to reinforce the authority of the Church, though this was the point at which Bossuet exploded into denunciation of Simon for undermining it.

The fallibility of language meant the fallibility of the canon, and even of the Gospels; but Simon thought Catholics could endure that, if they retained the infallibility of the Church, which could rectify and at need justify the imprecisions of even apostolic language. To Protestants, all this seemed to prepare the way for popery and the authority of the clergy over Scripture itself. Their counter-attack could open with a denunciation of the Fathers and their corrupt language, which had introduced an unmeaning theology that only an equally corrupt clergy could interpret; we shall see how they could also be blamed for perpetuating the belief in miracles after these had ceased. But the linguistic turn meant that not only the Fathers but the Apostles could be charged with confused speech and the enthusiasm that went with it; and the Platonist theology inherited from the Fathers by the Councils could be traced back to Paul and John themselves, and to the historical circumstances in which even the Fourth Gospel had been composed. Protestants could move into Enlightenment, by the first step of criticising Nicene and Athanasian Trinitarian doctrine, and by the second step of reducing all debate over Christ's person to the history of language and the history of philosophy. The eighteenth century both refought the battles of the fourth and historised them.

Simon knew that this would happen, and sought to exploit it. The orthodox knew, he said:

> que Saint Jean étoit d'une méchante bourgade nommée Bethsäide en Galilée, fils d'un pauvre pécheur; qu'il ignoroit entierement ce que les gens du monde appellent belles lettres, étant luy-même pécheur rude et grossier, ne sçachant ny parler ny écrire. Le Cardinal Tolete . . . dit que Saint Jean parle moins Grec que les autres Evangelistes; qu'il est remply d'Hebraismes; et que pour l'entendre il faut scavoir l'Hebreu aussi bien que le Grec.

One might suppose that Simon is exalting the Church by degrading the Apostle. He continues:

> Enjedine subtil Unitaire s'est aussi étendu fort au long sur le stile de cet Evangeliste, qu'il reconnaît être très obscur et très-difficile à entendre. Si l'on doît, dit-il, appeler grandeur de stile, un discours obscur, abregé et interrompu, qui n'a aucune liaison, et qui est remply d'allegories, j'avoue qu'en ce sens là le stile de Saint-Jean est sublime: car il ne rapporte aucune harangue de Jesus-Christ qui ne soit allegorique

et très-difficile à entendre. Il insiste fortement sur l'obscurité du commencement de cet Evangile, où l'on ne voit, selon luy, que des paroles figurées et des manieres de parler extraordinaires.[59]

St *John* was of a pitiful Village called *Bethsaida* in Galilee, the Son of a poor Fisher, who was altogether ignorant of that which the Men of the World call good Literature, himself a rude and plain Fisherman, who could neither speak nor write. The Cardinal *Toletus* . . . affirms that St John does speak worse *Greek* than the other Evangelists, that he is stuffed with *Hebraisms*, and that to understand him, it is necessary to know the *Hebrew* as well as the *Greek*.[60]

Enjedine,[61] a subtil *Unitary*, did also enlarge his Observations on the Stile of that Evangelist, which he looked on as very obscure, and very hard to be understood. *If we* (saith he) *ought to call that greatness of Stile which is an obscure Discourse*, abridged and interrupted, without any connection, and which *is full of Allegories*, *I avow*, *that in that Sense*, *St* John's *Stile is sublime: for he makes no Harangue concerning Jesus Christ which is not Allegorical*, *and very difficult to be understood*. He does strongly insist on the obscurity of the beginning of that Gospel, where (as he thinks) we can find nothing but figurative words, and uncouth forms of Speech.[62]

This draws close to saying of the Apostles what Le Clerc says of the Fathers. Enyedi was not far from being an Alogian, who denied both the Fourth Gospel and the Word made Flesh; but Simon is not far from accepting him for paradoxical reasons.

Il n'y a, ajoute cet Unitaire, aucun mot ny diction qui ne puissent être interpretées de differentes manieres, et même opposées. Cela étant, j'admire l'entêtement des Protestans et des Unitaires, qui osent s'opposer à la creance commune de toutes les Eglises du monde, n'étant fondés que sur des Actes qu'ils reconnoissent être si obscurs et si difficiles à entendre. Il est vray que les Protestans ne demeurent pas tout-à-fait d'accord de cette obscurité de l'Ecriture, principalement dans les endroits les plus importans: mais les Unitaires paroissent en cela de meilleure foy qu'eux, ne nians pas un fait qui saute aux yeux. Ils veulent seulement qu'on limite le nombre des points fondamentaux de notre creance.[63]

There is not a Word or Diction therein (as that *Unitary* does add) but what may be Expounded, several different, nay even opposite ways. This being so, I admire the headstrong prejudice of the Protestants and *Unitaries*, who dare

[59] Simon, 1689, pp. 214–15. [60] [Simon], 1689, pp. 86–7, 89.
[61] George Enyedi, a Hungarian Socinian read by Locke: Sand, 1684, pp. 93–4; Marshall, 1994, pp. 138–44.
[62] [Simon], 1689, II, p. 89. The French might be read as saying that the words of Christ, as reported by John, are themselves as obscure as the latter's language.
[63] Simon, 1689, p. 216.

oppose the common Belief of all the Churches of the World, having no other Foundation but that of Records, which they acknowledge to be so obscure and difficult to be understood. It is true that the Protestants do not altogether agree about the obscurity of Scripture, especially in the most important places; but the *Unitaries* in this matter, shew more Candor, not denying a thing which is obvious. They only desire that the number of the Fundamental Points of our Faith be limited.[64]

One can see how readily Protestants might take Simon at his word, adopting less the unitarian than the 'Socinian' strategy of leaving the nature of Christ perpetually open to discussion; a strategy as conducive to evangelical faith as to Enlightened scepticism. It would tend to a dismissive attitude towards all ancient controversies, and a reduction of them to intellectual or cultural history; but it would not satisfy those among Protestants, and rather notably Anglicans, who wished the Church to be visibly founded on the actions and the being of God. These would vigorously uphold the theology of Nicaea and all its proclaimed foundations back to the Fourth Gospel, and would assert a history not based upon the linguistic turn. Le Clerc was acquainted with the writings of the formidable George Bull, who had maintained that the Nicene theology was original in the Church, arguing that any lessening of the person of the Son of God was a move back to the unmoving God of the gnostics, so perfect that he disdained creation and his being was in silence rather than the Word. We shall have to see where this issue fitted into the ecclesiastical histories Gibbon cited. Le Clerc himself would have to decide whether historical linguistics would shelter him from theological commitment.

There was something in the Christian mindset which spoke against scepticism and silence. It seems reducible to the opening words of the Fourth Gospel. For Le Clerc, language might declare that the Word had been made Flesh and had dwelt among us, while confessing its impotence to convey in full what that Word was. The one thing it would not do was to consign the Word to silence. In the *Ars Critica*, Le Clerc quotes Augustine's *De Trinitate* as saying:

Dictum est tamen tres personae, non ut ALIQUID DICERETUR, sed NE TACERETUR.[65]

[We say there are three persons, not so that something be said, but so that we do not remain silent.]

[64] [Simon], 1689, II, p. 89. [65] Le Clerc, 1698a, p. 117.

There had been a Word; God was his Word. The God of the Christians must be eternally active, eternally creative, eternally his own Word spoken and heard by himself, and so eternally triune. This being so, there would have to be a sacred history. But human language, spoken by his fallen and finite creatures, partook of the curse and perhaps the sin of Adam. It must speak the Word, yet it could not utter it; whereof we could not speak, thereof we could not be silent.

CHAPTER 4

The Historia Ecclesiastica *and the later works of Le Clerc*

(1) THE NEW TESTAMENT: SOCINIANS, GNOSTICS AND PLATONISTS

A quarter-century or more separates these episodes in Le Clerc's authorial and editorial career from his publication of the *Historia Ecclesiastica duorum primorum a Christo nato saeculorum* in 1716. The latter need not have been a climactic work in his active life, and it is Gibbon's interest in it, and consequently our own, which accounts for its position in this study. A central role in Le Clerc's career may have been played by an incident about 1694, when – being dissatisfied with his position in the Netherlands – he wrote to Gilbert Burnet, now bishop of Salisbury, whom he had known in Amsterdam in the mid-1680s, to enquire whether he might hope for an academic or ecclesiastical appointment in England. Burnet was obliged to reply – as, after the incident of the Naked Gospel, Le Clerc should have known for himself – that his reputation as a Socinian or some other kind of anti-Trinitarian was far too well established for any such move to be possible.[1] Le Clerc responded by composing a commentary on the first chapter of the Gospel according to St John,[2] in which he sought to explain in what sense he was a Trinitarian – though we know that he thought the doctrine of consubstantiality far from clearly established in the ante-Nicene church. He carefully dated this commentary, which he more than once republished, from Amsterdam between April and September of 1695.[3] Its central assertion was that the Greek word *logos* – John's Word that was God – might be translated by the Latin *ratio*, rather than *verbum* or, as some had suggested, *sermo*; this is a discussion conducted entirely in Latin, not in French or English. Since *ratio* suggested the faculty of reason, it was necessary for Le Clerc to explain that the term denoted a *res* or reality, not

[1] Barnes, 1938, pp. 163–6, 250–60 (correspondence).
[2] Le Clerc, 1695. I do not pursue here the role of the *Bibliothèque choisie* in Le Clerc's publishing or doctrinal career.
[3] E.g. Le Clerc, 1714, p. 392.

merely a *qualitas* or attribute of God;[4] he needed to maintain the position that John's Logos was the Word by which all things had been made, and was both God and a distinct Person of God. *Verbum* sounded far more active and creative than *ratio* or *ratiocinatio*, which suggested merely that God was reflecting upon himself. Why Le Clerc preferred *ratio*, and how far he succeeded in using the term in a fully Trinitarian sense, are questions that need not concern us as much as they did him and his readers. (Burnet's response was that, though not a Socinian, he might still be a Sabellian.) Our concern is with the effects of this incident on Le Clerc's productive career, and on the composition and content of the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, the work mentioned by Gibbon in 1788, and used by him earlier.

Le Clerc's scholarly, and perhaps his journalistic, output from 1700 on displays a prominent concern with biblical, and in particular New Testament, editing and translation. In 1703 he converted the *Bibliothèque universelle et historique*, which had been dormant for some years, into the *Bibliothèque choisie*, a journal of a somewhat different character. Gibbon, reading its volumes sixty years later, remarked that it contained less of 'the theological and political spawn' which had preoccupied Europe after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and also that it dealt more with ancient and less with modern literature.[5] Whatever we make of the first judgement, the second may be misleading. The *Bibliothèque choisie*'s early issues consist largely of serial summaries in French of two English works: John Locke's *Paraphrases of the Epistles of St Paul*,[6] and Ralph Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe*,[7] neither, very likely, of much interest to Gibbon, though he possessed copies of both.[8] Locke had confronted the problem of which Richard Simon had made such destructive use: Paul's use of a semi-Hebraised Greek, which made the Apostle to the Gentiles difficult to read and might have impeded his expression of his own ideas, but had argued that a close attention to the language of the Epistles would show the spiritual truths he was authorised to convey taking shape upon the page.[9] Cudworth had written at a greater distance from the Christian canon, being preoccupied with the problem of philosophy, but had sought to show that Plato, carefully read, would not only bring the reader close to a knowledge of God – as Justin Martyr and Augustine had both testified – but

[4] Le Clerc, 1700, pp. 19–20, 1714, pp. 392–3. [5] EEG, p. 130.
[6] Locke, 1989. Locke died in 1704, and this work was first published in 1707.
[7] Cudworth, 1995. First published 1697. The modern edition contains an English translation of Mosheim's comments appended to his own translation of Cudworth into Latin.
[8] *Library*, pp. 182 (Locke's *Works*, 1777 edition), 105 (Cudworth).
[9] For a study of the *Paraphrases* in Locke's doctrinal development, see Marshall, 1994, ch. 10.

would support the doctrine of Christ's nature worked out by the Church once the leap into faith had been taken. In presenting those two works in such detail, it seems possible, Le Clerc was supporting his presentation of his own Christian orthodoxy, as he himself understood it.

He proceeded, alongside his other interests, with two massive projects in New Testament scholarship. One of these was a *Harmonia Evangelica, cui subjuncta est Historia Jesu Christi, ex Quatuor Evangeliis concinnata*, published in 1700,[10] by which time Le Clerc had brought out the first edition (1698) of a translation, with commentary, of the English divine Henry Hammond's paraphrase, with commentary, of the New Testament.[11] The *Harmonia Evangelica* is a work of a kind often undertaken by scholars, in which the accounts of Christ's life given in the Four Gospels are presented in parallel form and anomalies and problems arising are addressed. The 'history of Jesus' resulting is a coordinated narrative of the events of his life on earth, his passion and resurrection. When Le Clerc comes to the Fourth Gospel, however, it is a different matter, since John departs from narrative to make statements about Christ's nature and divinity, and Le Clerc was obliged to defend the positions he had taken regarding their interpretation. He therefore reverted to his earlier commentary on John, chapter 1, and reiterated his reasons for translating *logos* as *ratio*. In the *Historia Jesu Christi* he may go a step further, since we read:

> Divina Sapientia, a quo omnia condita sunt, in Jesu habitat, quamquam a Judaeis repudiatur.[12]
>
> [The divine wisdom by which all things were made dwelt in Jesus, though the Jews rejected it.]

Divine wisdom is still a creative force, power rather than reflection, but it is a question whether *habitat* is enough to declare an incarnation. There is another passage which seems to present Jesus as primarily a messenger.

> JESUS, qui verus CHRISTUS, et in quo divina RATIO residet, ad nos nuncium adtulit de misericordia et benignitate Dei, quibus et praeterita omnia peccata nobis condonantur, et intolerabile Mosaicorum legum jugum detrahitur. Antea eum Dei voluntatem nemo plene intellexerat, sed is, quem diximus, UNIGENITUS DEI FILIUS, singulare amore a Patre dilectus, ejus rei ad nos nuncius, a Deo missus est.[13]

[10] Le Clerc, 1700. An English translation appeared next year; [Le Clerc], 1701. Note that this is two years later than Le Clerc's defence of himself against an attack on his translation of Hammond; [Le Clerc], 1699.

[11] Le Clerc, 1698b, 1714.

[12] Le Clerc, 1700, p. 19. Trans. JGAP, as are all translations in this chapter not otherwise attributed.

[13] Ibid., p. 20; Le Clerc, 1714, p. 393.

[Jesus, who is the true Christ and in whom the divine Reason resides, brings us word of the mercy and goodness of God, by whom all our past sins are forgiven, and the intolerable weight of the Mosaic laws is taken away. Before him no one had fully understood God's will; but he whom we name God's only begotten Son, especially beloved of his Father, was sent us by God as the messenger of this matter.]

It may seem that Jesus is a messenger, and saves us through the word he brings rather than the sacrifice he offers. This might sound Socinian, and the vehemence with which the Jewish law is condemned leans towards the gnostic; but the insistence that Jesus is the true Christ implies rejection of the gnostic or Cerinthan separation of the two beings. Le Clerc was navigating the margins of orthodoxy, but aimed to remain within them.

He was much given to the re-use and recycling of material, and the full text of his 1695 commentary on John, and most of the above passages from the *Harmonia Evangelica*, reappear in the translation of Henry Hammond which he published in 1698 and revised in 1714, two years before the *Historia Ecclesiastica*.[14] Hammond's work had been published in 1653,[15] *in Cromwellianis temporibus* as Le Clerc once put it,[16] at a time when the Church of England was partly underground before its semi-Laudian restoration.[17] His scholarship belonged to a phase of Anglican culture with which Le Clerc had difficulty coming to terms; Hammond's English, he says, is *horridus*[18] – probably meaning 'thorny' – and he has the same problem as Mosheim long after him was to have in translating Cudworth.[19] Mid-seventeenth-century clerical English was too rich, too figurative and probably too Platonist to go well into polished and Enlightened Latin. Le Clerc tells us that his translation conveys Hammond's meaning more clearly than Hammond could himself[20] – his old complaint against the Fathers. Nor is it style only; Hammond has concerns Le Clerc cannot share:

Gnosticos, nempe, obsidionem Jerosolimitanam, et Disciplinam Ecclesiasticam seu Excommunicationem; quae passim invenit, ubi alii Interpretes alia omnia quaerunt.[21]

[the gnostics, the siege of Jerusalem, and ecclesiastical discipline or excommunication; which he regularly finds in places where other interpreters pursue quite other matters.]

[14] Cf. Le Clerc, 1700, pp. 19–20, 1714, pp. 391–3. [15] Hammond, 1653.
[16] Le Clerc, 1714, 'Dedicatio', sig. 3. [17] Ibid., 'Praefatio I. *Editionis*', unpaginated.
[18] Ibid., 'Dedicatio', sig. 4v: 'horridus et parum castigatus'. [19] Below, p. 164 n. 6.
[20] Le Clerc, 1714, 'Praefatio II. *Editionis*', unpaginated. [21] Ibid., 'Praefatio I. *Editionis*', p. 2.

Hammond's interests could be explained, but times had changed in half a century. Le Clerc's decision to expend labour in translating and improving his work is hard to explain without supposing a complex relationship with English churchmanship, persisting after he had lost all hope of an English position; he cites a great many English authorities in his writings. Mention of the gnostics, however, leads us beyond Hammond into Le Clerc, and into a labyrinth of shifting meanings important in the shaping of ecclesiastical history. Hammond had applied this term to the false teachers mentioned by Paul in the Epistles,[22] who are said to claim a *gnōsis* or secret knowledge, which Paul condemns. Hammond thought them a medley of uprooted Jews and Greeks, who feigned Christianity while taking part in pagan rites which they believed to mean nothing. Their hidden idolatry consisted in the worship of Simon Magus and his companion Helena, as representing divine forces to which *gnōsis* was the key.[23] Le Clerc thought the groups indicated by Paul exclusively Jewish in origin, and wished to detach them as far as possible from any continuity between the legend of Simon and the 'gnostics' described by Irenaeus.[24] His criticisms of Hammond on this point left unsettled the question of the secret *gnōsis* mentioned by Paul. Judaising Christians, who thought of Jesus as the Messiah, were inclined to represent him as a man born of Joseph and Mary; the name 'Ebionites', followers of a shadowy 'Ebion', was said to denote this belief. But no hidden *gnōsis* was called upon to express it in this simple form, and the term 'gnostic' implied the further doctrine – not only Jewish, though occurring among Jewish converts – that the man Jesus had been visited and possessed by the divine or at least spiritual 'Christ', who had entered him at his baptism and departed from him at his death;[25] a doctrine irreconcilable with what became the orthodox reading of St John's Gospel. This was the position ascribed to the equally shadowy 'Cerinthus', to confute whom, tradition said, John had written; and Cerinthus and Ebion are sometimes interchangeable figures.[26] Le Clerc, however, had perceived that Irenaeus's gnostics represented the conjoined Jesus and Christ as coming to redeem, or rather liberate, their worshippers from the imperfect world created by the angel who was the god of the Jews; a *gnōsis* unlikely to

[22] In particular, 2 Corinthians ii, 3–4; Galatians i, 7–8; 1 Timothy i, 3–4, 7; iv, 1–3; vi, 3–4, 20–1.

[23] Hammond, 1653, pp. 464, 465, 467, 470, 567, 691, 700. His 'Gnostics' are primarily those he thinks may be found in the Epistles and traditions concerning Simon Magus. The *aiones* and the genealogies connecting them with the progress from silence to secondary creation appear only when he has occasion to mention Irenaeus's account; pp. 718–21, 725–6.

[24] Le Clerc, 1714, 'Praefatio 1. *Editionis*'.

[25] Below, p. 131.

[26] Epiphanius makes Ebion, not Cerinthus, the heretic in the bath-house from whom John recoils; below, p. 156.

have been held by Judaising Christians, and more likely the work of Gentile converts aiming to separate Christian beliefs from their Jewish past.[27] His criticism of Hammond, therefore, is designed to sever the false teachers described by Paul – it is too soon to call them 'heretics' – from the gnostics proper, the various *sectae* or *haereseis* described at such length by Irenaeus and Epiphanius, and denounced by Justin and Tertullian. To understand why he wished to effect this separation, we must return to the problem of the Fourth Gospel.

Burnet in 1694 had warned Le Clerc to dissociate himself from some in England of the kind called Alogians.[28] He did not name them, and there is not much trace of their activities, though in the age of John Toland almost anything is possible. The Alogians mentioned in antiquity were so hostile to the Johannine doctrine of the Logos that they presented the Fourth Gospel, far from having been written to confute Cerinthus, as a cunning forgery by that heretic himself; as if the Word made Flesh were indistinguishable from a gnostic aeon. Le Clerc took Burnet's warning seriously and referred to it in the commentary upon John, the *Harmonia Evangelica* and the *Novum Testamentum*'s commentaries upon Hammond, where his earlier responses are reprinted and reiterated. Here he follows Irenaeus, Eusebius and Jerome in saying that John wrote against Cerinthus,[29] but – while continuing to defend his translation of *logos* as *ratio*[30] – offers an alternative or perhaps additional interpretation. Platonic thinking, he says, had invaded both Jewish and Christian discourse before John wrote; much of it was heretical – a term he now finds it possible to use – as may be seen from fragments that survive in Irenaeus. It is reasonable, he continues, to suppose that the Apostle had its potential errors in mind, in particular those of the Jewish Platonist Philo of Alexandria, who presents a non-Christian view of the Trinity derived from Plato, clearly anticipating the Arian heresy of the fourth century.[31]

An important reformulation of doctrinal history is taking shape here. The gnosticisms described by Irenaeus, with their esoteric dualisms, their aeonic genealogies and their Christ as liberator from the imperfect creation of Jehovah – clearly, Le Clerc once suggested, invented by Gentile converts who hated Jews and Judaisers[32] – were always more than Le Clerc could bring himself to believe in, even as heresies. As John's adversary in the Fourth Gospel, he preferred the respectable if mistaken Philo to the

[27] Cf. HE, p. 497.
[28] Barnes, 1938, pp. 251–2. Burnet does not use the term, but was so interpreted (rightly) by Le Clerc; see 1714, p. 391. Cf. pp. 56, 112, above.
[29] Le Clerc, 1714, p. 391. [30] Ibid., pp. 392, 398–400. [31] Ibid., p. 396. [32] HE, p. 497.

shadowy and disreputable figures of Ebion and Cerinthus, and he was beginning to effect an assimilation of gnosticism to the history of Platonism. The Platonic Trinity, in which the Word never became Flesh, did not make it the equal of the Father, but if the Word were that by which all things were made, this separation of persons lessened the creative role of both. George Bull, of whom Le Clerc was always aware, had forcefully asserted that only the Johannine Logos in its Nicene fullness stood between Christians and the unmoving and uncreating God of the gnostics, and that Platonism did not explain heresy; the Arians, he had insisted, were merely gnostics once removed.[33] Le Clerc, never a Nicene, at this point repeats that *logos* means *ratio*, and that 'the Word made Flesh' denotes not a conversion of natures but an inhabitation of Jesus by the divine wisdom.[34] But this is also the point at which he begins to suggest that gnosticism was no more than a misguided Platonism, which if it indeed denied or denigrated the Creator did so because of the inherent ambivalence of Platonic philosophy. Here he encounters Irenaeus, and begins to imply that the fantastic beliefs of the Basilideans and Valentinians are irrelevant to the story because they are fantasies of Irenaeus's mind.

Vir profecto fuit pius et Religioni Christianae addictissimus, cui sanguine suo, ut multi putant, subscripsit; sed callidum rerum et dogmatum aestimatorem numquam credunt, qui eius Opus non oscitanter legerint. Optandum etiam fuisset maluisse eum misericordiae suae in Heterodoxos specimina nobis relinquere, quam zeli, qui saepe ita irae adfinis est, ut vix ab ea possit secerni. Certe infinita eorum deliria misericordia digniora erant, quam ira.[35]

[He was certainly a pious man, devoted to the Christian religion, to which as many think he witnessed with his blood; but no one will think him a sophisticated student of doctrines and dogmas who has read his work with any care. It is much to be wished that he had chosen to leave us some expression of pity towards the heretics, rather than a zeal so close to wrath that it can hardly be distinguished from it. Certainly their interminable madnesses were more deserving of pity than of anger.]

'The primitive fathers', Gibbon was to write, 'are very frequently calumniators'. The charge, often made, usually refers to tales of the gnostics' nocturnal orgies, of which Epiphanius is full; but the suggestion here is that wrathful zeal has led Irenaeus to attribute to them wild and mad beliefs, instead of citing their texts, from which we might have drawn our own conclusions. The implication goes further; gnostic dualisms and theosophies disappear from history, taking Simon and Helena with them,

[33] [Bull], 1725, I, p. 25. [34] Le Clerc, 1714, p. 402. [35] Ibid., p. 403.

and we are left with the direct if infinitely subtle confrontation between Platonism and the Fourth Gospel, so that the history we read is reducible to the encounter of 'the foolishness of the word' with Greek philosophy. It is left unexplained why Hellenist culture was so heavily pervaded by philosophy that the last of the fishermen of Galilee must live a hundred years to master and respond to it; but Le Clerc remains in a position to use Lockean philosophy, and the theology arising from it, as arguments for toleration. Apostles and philosophers, orthodox and heterodox, are struggling with the same language difficulties and should treat each other with respect and themselves with cultural scepticism.

(II) THE STRUCTURE OF THE *HISTORIA ECCLESIASTICA*

The *Historia Ecclesiastica* is not among Le Clerc's major works, although he intended to continue it into later centuries and Gibbon included it among his principal sources. It probably ranked in Le Clerc's mind among and below his studies in New Testament textual criticism, and its central theme is the transmission of the gospel as Scripture and the rise of a post-canonical and post-apostolic literature. Nevertheless, it is not an *histoire critique* as the term was then used, but a history in the early modern sense, obliging the writer to follow and report his authorities even when he had doubts of them. This obligation would be reinforced by Le Clerc's conviction that the truth was in the Scriptures even though apostles and evangelists had had difficulty finding the words in which to report it (a reason for translating *logos* as *ratio* rather than *verbum*). The *Historia* is early modern, even archaic, in the further sense that it is annalistic; it is arranged according to the years of the vulgar Christian era, the years since Christ's birth as subsequently re-dated, the years of Herodian history as reported by Josephus and above all the years of the Roman consulate as recorded in the *fasti*. This last dominates Le Clerc's text as he proceeds through the first century and on to the second; he is following the ultimately Eusebian practice of verifying ecclesiastical history by synchronising it with secular, i.e. Roman. By placing itself in a civil chronology, sacred history declared itself no myth.

This is the structure of a history in which the themes that concern Le Clerc must emerge and be arranged, and it seems generally true that these are fewer in number than they were for Eusebius or Tillemont. The downfall of the Jews in the war of the Temple and the rebellion of Bar Kochba are noticed, but do not occupy the foreground; perhaps Le Clerc's Protestant and critical belief in the exclusive significance of Scripture

alone diminished his concern for a fuller sacred history. The themes of persecution and martyrology are also less conspicuous; perhaps because Le Clerc as a Protestant did not dwell upon the number of intercessors, perhaps for the reason – to which we must return – that the *Historia* goes no further than AD 200, by which time persecution was still at an early state of development. We do not learn from it what Le Clerc thought of several of the major themes which concerned Tillemont, still less those which interested Gibbon. Those that concern Le Clerc are presented in an orderly fashion. The *Historia* opens with 180 pages of *Prolegomena*,[36] presenting the religious and philosophical beliefs of 'the human race' – *humani generis* – at the time of Christ's birth. The human race is divided into Jews and Gentiles (*ethnici*) and the latter are Greeks, to the exclusion of all others but Romans. Here we have the two cultures with which the first Christians had to deal, and their *status quod ad Religionem adtinet* is organised intellectually. The Jews are ordered according to their *sectae* and *dogmata*[37] – Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes, with mention of Zealots and of the Samaritans in schism. Le Clerc's sources are Josephus and Philo, and this is as close as Christian scholarship usually came to a historical understanding of the late Second Temple period, and its messianism which could not accept what was said of Jesus. His study of the *ethnici* opens with a chapter on their *idolatria ac mores*,[38] i.e. their polytheism, in which it is possible to detect an Arminian difficulty in believing that God had created angels, some of whom – early Christians asserted – had become demons and taken the shapes of pagan gods. Thereafter there is nothing but *sectae* and *dogmata*: the four schools of Athenian philosophy.[39] Le Clerc has entirely accepted the premise that the Mission to the Gentiles was an encounter with Greek philosophy, out of which the heresies and the replies to them all emerged; why (or whether) philosophy was so ubiquitous, pervasive and culturally dominant is not a question he thinks of asking. It may, however, have its part in sacred history; Le Clerc, here and elsewhere, cites with approval Clement of Alexandria's suggestion that philosophy was God's *foedus*, or covenant, with the Greeks.[40] In what sense the latter might be false to their covenant, and apostasise as the Jews had done, is not considered. Philosophy is a gift of Providence, not a revelation.

The *Prolegomena* continue with a chapter on the limitations of philosophy,[41] which comes close to knowing God but can never take the

[36] HE, pp. 2–181. [37] Ibid., pp. 3–47. [38] Ibid., pp. 48–85.
[39] Ibid., pp. 59–85. [40] Ibid., pp. 88–9.
[41] Ibid., pp. 86–91: 'Utilem quidem fuisse Philosophiam, sed ad certam et plenam Veritatis cognitionem deducere non potuisse.' Note the past tenses.

last step: the point to which Justin Martyr had conducted it and at which he had left it. This is the philosophy of antiquity; there is no indication that Descartes and Locke have achieved a revolution and relegated the philosophy of the Gentiles to history. As Le Clerc had told Locke nearly thirty years before, his concern with *métaphysique* was limited to its *pratique* as *la critique*. There ensues – in length half of the *Prolegomena*[42] – an account of the Christian religion, in which a theology no doubt Le Clerc's is dwarfed by an exposition of morality. He is displaying his orthodoxy, rational and evangelical, in the terms in which he is ready to defend it; but the question is what shape this will give to his historical narrative.

The *Historia Ecclesiastica* begins with an account of the Annunciation and Nativity, carefully synchronised with the Roman, Herodian and Christian chronologies, as far as the Flight into Egypt and the death of Herod.[43] It is then suspended, to make room for a *Vitae Christi Historia*, from his childhood to his ascension, not annalistically constructed,[44] but divided into sections of which, no doubt significantly, there are exactly 100.[45] This may be compared with the *Historia Jesu Christi* published by Le Clerc as part of the *Harmonia Evangelica*[46] sixteen years before; both carefully recount the events of Christ's life, death and resurrection, based on a concordance of all four Gospels. Le Clerc is pursuing his Protestant, Arminian and critical strategy, leaving no doubt that events of redemptive significance occurred and were revealed to the Apostles, while abstaining from a definitive statement of that significance and leaving the Apostles themselves in a history being written: that of their endeavours to transmit their gospel, to understand and find words for it. The history of the Church is the history of this transmission, from Christ to the Apostles, from the Apostles to the Jews and the Gentiles, from the Apostles to the Fathers, the Councils and, to quote Gibbon again, 'the uninspired teachers and believers of the gospel'.[47] It is not a Catholic history of uninterrupted truth and authority; the question is what continuity Le Clerc will find in it.

The *Historia* resumes its course at the Ascension, and runs in a series of chapters to the Council of Jerusalem, the deaths of Peter and Paul and the end of the first century.[48] It is constrained by the inadequacy of the book of Acts, which is not annalistically arranged,[49] breaks off at Paul's journey to Rome and tells us nothing about the majority of the Apostles. Le Clerc wished that some *vir apostolicus* – a term indicating an intimate of some Apostle, rather than one of their number – had filled the gap, or

[42] Ibid., pp. 92–181. [43] Ibid., pp. 183–220. [44] Ibid., p. 338. [45] Ibid., pp. 221–327.
[46] Mentioned in a footnote; ibid., p. 323. [47] Womersley, 1994, I, p. 446; cf. p. 11 above.
[48] HE, pp. 327–64, 365–452, 453–522. [49] Ibid., p. 338.

that Luke himself had told us more of the life of Peter.[50] He knew there were apocryphal and unorthodox gospels using the names of Thomas and others,[51] and he needed a critical account of Peter's association with Rome; but he does not seem to enquire why the canon of received writings has been left in this historiographically unsatisfactory condition. Acts, however, recounts several occurrences crucial to the history of the gospel: first, the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit acts for the first time, empowering the Apostles to speak with tongues and work miracles. If Le Clerc accepts the division of the Jews into two linguistic groups, speaking respectively a Hebraised Greek and a Chaldeanised or Syrianised Hebrew, he might ask how far a gift of tongues had been needed; but there is the deeper question whether the Spirit on this occasion is inspiring the Apostles to speak true doctrine. There is a sense in which the matter of doctrine has yet to arise; we are in the presence of unlearned men proclaiming the Son of God, not defining his Sonship; but something is about to occur which may raise the issue of heresy. We may, that is, extend the account of Simon Magus given in Acts to make him the author of all subsequent gnosticisms. Le Clerc is cautious about this,[52] as about the tale that Simon encountered Peter at Rome[53] – the question of Peter mattered more than the question of Simon – but we know from his criticisms of Hammond that the issue of gnosticism affected his reading also of Paul.

The advent of Paul, and the extension of the gospel to the Gentiles, form the central and crucial narrative of the book of Acts. Here the Christian evangel encountered, and helped shape, the Greco-Roman culture of late antiquity, which was to affect it so deeply for the first six centuries of its existence that either history may be considered an aspect of the other. More immediately, the person and personality of Saul who becomes Paul alter the entire meaning of the term 'Apostle' and the character of the transmission of the Word. With the original disciples of Christ in mind, Le Clerc had written:

> Spiritus quidem Sanctus adfuit Apostolis, ut iis in memoriam revocaret, quae a Christo acceperant, ut ipse promiserat. Joan. XIV.26. Sed Spiritus Sanctus, in hac quoque re, non solo adflatu, verum et naturalibus eorum facultatibus usum est, ut varietas ipsa narrationis et verborum, in quattuor Evangeliis, ostendit.[54]
>
> [The Holy Spirit was with the Apostles, so that it might bring back to their memories all that they had heard from Christ, as he himself had promised. John,

[50] Ibid., pp. 411–12. [51] Ibid., pp. 414, 454–70 (a fuller account of the canon).
[52] Ibid., pp. 334–5.
[53] Ibid., pp. 350–4; the first full account given of gnostic beliefs (Irenaeus) and practices (Epiphanius).
[54] Ibid., p. 414.

xiv, 26. But in this matter the Spirit made use not of inspiration only, but of their natural faculties, as is evident from the diversity of their words and narratives in the four Gospels.]

The disciples had heard and seen the incarnate Christ speak and act; the Holy Ghost acted as much as an aide-memoire as a divine voice; they had not ceased to be fallible. But Paul on the road to Damascus had heard and seen the resurrected and ascended Christ, a presence beyond even the incarnate, and the vision he experienced might not depend upon his natural senses. Furthermore, he had taught doctrine beyond what was to be found in Matthew, Mark, Luke or the narrative chapters of John, and it was a question how and from whom he had received it: in a sojourn in the desert, communicating with the Spirit or the Son?[55] And he had been the Apostle to the Gentiles, uttering the message as he had received it to Greeks and in Greek – pure Greek or a hybrid language of prophecy? – so that he spoke at Athens of the matter of Jerusalem. Cultural translation became not only the theme of Christian history, but a requisite of Christian salvation. The intellectualisation of the gospel had begun, escaping the grip of the unlearned fishermen of Galilee.

It was in the first and second chapters of the *Historia* that Le Clerc had to deal with the Epistles of St Paul, which he thought contemporaneous with, but independent of, the composition of the Gospels. Here he revisited his commentary upon Hammond's reading of the false teachers and their false *gnōsis* mentioned by Paul. He was apprehensive of finding himself committed to the full proposed history of 'gnosticism' that began with the Simon Magus of Acts and continued through the Basilideans and Valentinians of Irenaeus, and Marcion as reported by Tertullian. Here Le Clerc encountered two narratives that gave him difficulty, and took him beyond the narrative of Acts, whose truncated history left him without accredited sources at a point where Paul had not finished writing his Epistles. Paul had moved to Rome, and Peter must have done the same if there was truth in either their joint martyrdom under Nero or Peter's role as bishop of the imperial city. Le Clerc had reason to think critically of both but was not ready to abandon either. The traditional narratives at this point, however, told an obviously fabulous tale of a great thaumaturgical struggle at Rome between Peter and Paul as champions of Christ and Simon Magus in the role of magician; and Justin Martyr, reinforcing this legend with that of an altar set up there to Simon as a god, had linked him

[55] Ibid., p. 337: 'non ab hominibus, sed a Christo ipso'.

with the elaborate gnosticisms described by Irenaeus.[56] Le Clerc, like many another, finds space to explain Justin's mistake.

(iii) from gnosticism to platonism

Le Clerc was now encountering the problem of heresies, as forming a large part of the history of the Church and as they figured in his contemporary need to assert and defend toleration.[57] His strategy had become that of presenting an original revelation of an unutterable truth, and tracing the history of subsequent human, semantically limited and historically specific attempts to state it. Any or all of these must be less than final, and short of locating infallible authority in a church, they were obliged to respect one another's divergences. There was a history that could be written of these speech acts, and writing it was in itself a call for toleration. It was, however, easiest by far if that history could be written as that of successive attempts to define the nature of Christ, of which the opening chapter of the Fourth Gospel was an obvious starting point; and indeed the recorded history of theological dispute was one of conflicting orthodox and heterodox definitions of the divine nature. *Haeresis* meaning 'sect' might be the term for any one of these definitions, orthodox in its own eyes but not so adjudged by others. There was a history of debate within the Church, agreed that there was a problem but divided as to its solution; a history, in short, of speech acts by Christians. The history of 'gnosticism', however, cut across this narrative; first, by beginning with the acts of a single malign figure – Simon Magus – second, by arriving at the 'heresies' described by Irenaeus, some of which it was possible to describe as not Christian at all. Certainly, the distinction between Jesus the man and Christ the aeon did not differ so widely from other accounts of his nature as to seem other than one more 'heresy' in the accepted sense; but the claim that creation was imperfect, the work of a lesser deity, and that deity the god of the Jews, went so far further as to make 'gnosticism' an aberrant doctrine not so much of Christ as of God. In wrestling with a narrative that ran from Simon and Helena to Valentinus and Marcion, Le Clerc was trying to rid himself of an account of heresy that could not be reduced to the terms within which he wished to confine it.

There was then more to the problems Le Clerc visibly had with Irenaeus's *Adversus Haereses* than his difficulty in believing that the human mind

[56] Ibid., pp. 350–4.

[57] The first extended considerations of this question occur, in the history of the first century, in ibid., between pp. 481 and 499.

could have produced or believed such nonsense as the aeonic genealogies, which are not Jewish, Gentile or Christian.[58] We can also plumb the depths of his exasperation with the Acts of the Apostles, and even with St Luke, its reported author.[59] By failing to carry the life of Paul down to his martyrdom, Luke had further left us with no account of the last years of Peter at Rome, other than the fictitious tale of his struggle with Simon; and he had left us unable to synchronise apostolic history with the Roman history given by Tacitus, or the Jewish history recounted by Josephus, in their accounts of the crises of AD 68–70. Le Clerc arrived at these problems through study of the Pauline Epistles, which postdated the narrative of Acts but preceded, in his opinion, the composition of the Gospels. He did not think that either Mark – Eusebius to the contrary notwithstanding – or Luke had written with the intention of confuting heresies;[60] and we have seen how his attempts to eliminate the grand narrative of gnosticism from the Epistles of Paul had led him in his work on Hammond to a reconsideration of the Gospel according to St John. This Apostle was a towering figure in Christian and ecclesiastical history. He had outlived both Paul and Peter, surviving the persecutions of both Nero and Domitian; his Fourth Gospel had differed from the others in passing from the historical events of Jesus's life and resurrection to the definition of his divine nature – it is easy to see why Le Clerc found it necessary to deny being an Alogian. John had lived to a great age, composing both his Gospel and his Apocalypse in the attempt, it was said – especially in the former case – to confute the quasi-gnostic heresies of Ebion and Cerinthus. His long life was needed to explain, or to obscure, his transformation from unlettered fisherman to master of both philosophy and its supersession; and we have already seen Le Clerc attempting to transfer him and his Gospel from the history of gnosticism into that of Platonism. This is repeated in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, where John is central to the unstated premise that Greek culture was so far dominated by philosophy that the Mission to the Gentiles became a debate with, and among, philosophers.

Apollonius of Tyana here makes a predictable if transient reappearance;[61] but Le Clerc's third chapter is dominated by the figure of John. Like Apollonius, in some ways his anti-type, he survives the persecution of Domitian, not by magical flight but by voluntary withdrawal to Patmos, where his

[58] Ibid., p. 482.

[59] Ibid., pp. 411–12: 'Utinam vero vir quispiam Apostolicus, pari judicio et fide, ceterorum [apostolorum] res gestas litteris mandasset . . . Mirum est Lucam, postquam liberationem Petri e carcere narravit . . . ne verbulum quidem de eo habere . . . de adventu Pauli in Urbem'.

[60] Ibid., pp. 429–30.

[61] Ibid., pp. 500, 507–8, 511–12.

Apocalypse gives Le Clerc occasion to deal with the many problems it presented.[62] His Epistles are accepted as written against false doctrines,[63] such as were subsequently termed heresies; but Le Clerc is cautious about using this term, and regrets that Irenaeus has not given us their writings, or those of Cerinthus and others against whom the Fourth Gospel was supposedly written. We have noted his suggestion that if we had these, they might prove to have been rather Platonist than gnostic,[64] and this is the background to Le Clerc's proposal that *logos* should be translated by *ratio.* He was anxious to remain as orthodox and Trinitarian as it was possible for a tolerationist to be, and for this reason desired to replace the gnostic narrative by the Platonist, the narrative of heresies by the narrative of philosophies transformed by the person of Christ.

John's death in the year 100[65] terminates the first of Le Clerc's *duorum primorum saeculorum*. It also equates that century with the age of the Apostles, in which the Christian evangel was transmitted by those who had seen Christ with their own eyes, and – in Paul's case, or – had been empowered by the Holy Spirit to relate and interpret their recollections correctly. With John's departure we enter not only a new century, but a new age, that of 'the uninspired teachers and believers of the gospel'. From now on, the Fathers – who are central to the history – and the elders, presbyters and bishops who are beginning to appear in the congregations, must claim, offer and receive new kinds of assurance that what they are transmitting is the truth; and this is no less a problem for Le Clerc than he must show it was for them. It is a further problem whether the second century of the Christian era will provide the space for him to work these problems out.

(iv) from revelation to providence

It would be easy to say that for Le Clerc the second Christian century was the age of the Fathers. More precisely defined as the Apostolic and post-Apostolic Fathers, these were the transmitters of doctrine living after the end of the apostolic period in AD 100; the sometimes controversial figures who had or had not heard the Apostles speak, and had or had not preserved the tradition handed on to them or interpreted it in its scriptural recensions. Le Clerc had in his previous writings commented acidly and at length on the turgid style and imprecise thinking of 'the Fathers' as a group; this is to be found only in modified form in the concluding section of the

[62] Ibid., pp. 512–13. [63] Ibid., pp. 503–5. [64] Repeated at ibid., p. 514. [65] Ibid., p. 520.

Historia Ecclesiastica headed 'Saeculum Secundum'. Le Clerc's strictures on these writers are repeated, but in moderate language and subject to more insightful historical explanation; but a further reason for this change of tone may be that 'the Fathers' – it is not a key term – of the second century are a small and specific group, dominated by the figures of Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, with the usually renowned Tertullian reduced to a supporting role. Le Clerc is now writing as a historian, and it is Justin and Irenaeus who supply him with information on the themes of heresy, philosophy and gnosticism, which have become crucial in his narrative. He is therefore obliged to follow their texts and review them in detail, and the conventions of historiography in this time mean that he must do this even where he is unhappy with his authorities – as in these two cases he not infrequently is. It is not certain that he thought Justin and Irenaeus given to turgid bombast and unmeaning eloquence – as we shall see Conyers Middleton did – but even if he had he would have had to follow and paraphrase them. There was history to be written.

The second century was a new age, in which infallibility had ceased and both actors and historians faced new problems.

> Pertexta, ad mortem usque Joannis, Apostolica Historia, ad ea tempora pervenimus; quibus cum nulli essent amplius in vivis Christi Discipuli, hominesve quemadmodum fuerant adflati, multa sunt dicta et facta; quae difficulter a nobis, per omnia, probari queant.[66]
>
> [Having covered the apostolic history to the death of John, we come to those times in which none were left living of the disciples of Christ, or men in any other way inspired, so that many things were done and said, not all of which are easy for us to approve.]

Gibbon was by no means the first to notice the fallibility of the Gospel's 'uninspired teachers and believers'; their writings had been noted as problematical since very early times. What he did not share, or say that he shared, is the faith, expressed in the following passage, that the message would survive its transmitters.

> Nec eo secius ad conservandam Ecclesiam Christianam, latiusque eius proferenda pomoeria, Divina Providentia invigilavit; quippe quae, licet eam in rem tam eximiis viris non amplius uteretur, tamen ne quidquam in summa Religionis Christianae mutaretur impediit; incolumem, per hominum inscitiam et errores, praestitit; et in dies credentium numerum, quamvis Judaei atque Ethnici totis viribus adversarentur, auxit.[67]

[66] Ibid., p. 523. [67] Ibid.

[No less attentively did Divine Providence watch over the preservation of the Christian Church and widening of its borders; the more so as, though it made no further use to this end of such extraordinary men, it ensured that no supreme point of the Christian religion should be altered, preserved it intact among the ignorance and errors of men, and daily increased the number of believers, though Jews and Gentiles resisted it with all their powers.]

As the work of the Spirit ceases, that of Providence begins; its function is to displace Catholic tradition and authority; but there is little theological explanation of what this agency is, or how it operates. Gibbon sceptically observes that it made use of the passions of humanity and the accidents of history; but though the preservation of truth and the enlargement of the Christian community are here linked for the first time in the texts before us, we must traverse ten pages of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* before we learn with what problems Providence is faced or how it overcomes them. In order to understand this, Le Clerc says, we must understand, at the outset of the second century, how deeply the Apostles differed from their own disciples, or from those taught by the latter. The Apostles relied on three sources: the sacred writings of the Old Testament, which they did not need in Greek since they knew Hebrew; the words of Christ himself, which they had heard with their own ears and their memory of which had been perfected by the Holy Ghost; and the revelations which God had made since the Ascension to Peter and Paul.[68] But those who heard the Apostles or read the Evangelists must rely on their words alone, and as the gospel entered the Greek world it became prey to extra-scriptural accidents of history and language. Of itself the 'foolishness of the Word' spoken by the inspired, it had needed neither Jewish nor Greek cultural reinforcement, but as it had not set out to speak all truths at once, its Gentile hearers in particular had been hampered by cultural limitations. Greeks knew no Hebrew; Hellenist Jews, who had almost lost their language to Greek, were tempted to believe the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament inspired, as it had not been;[69] and Le Clerc knew of no Christian, in the long succession of the Fathers, who had studied Hebrew until Jerome in the fifth century. Misreadings of New Testament Greek had therefore occurred, which knowledge of Hebrew would have prevented; and Le Clerc goes on to explain how Justin Martyr was misled in the matters of Christ's descent into hell and the origins of angels and demons.[70] The gap created by ignorance of the relation between the two Testaments was filled by the Platonic philosophy in which literate converts had been trained; and

[68] Ibid., pp. 523–4. [69] Ibid., pp. 525–6. [70] Ibid., pp. 525–9.

Platonic explanations of the Trinity of God, the immortality of the soul and the meaning of the word *logos* in the revelation of Christ's nature imposed themselves on the original sources of Christian knowledge. Was this, or was this not, the work of Providence? Le Clerc is not very specific about what the true knowledge was, or about the possibility that Platonic language had appeared as early as the Fourth Gospel. Language and error generated confusion, and the philosophic languages of dialectic and disputation were called in to clarify problems whose origins made some of them fictitious and even nonsensical; the *ars critica*, says Le Clerc, was little known in an antiquity ignorant of philology.[71]

Saeculo Secundo potissimum, ut videbimus, coeperunt erumpere variorum generum Haeretici, quos non difficulter locis Scripturae confutarunt rectius sentientes Christiani; quod factum videmus ab *Irenaeo*, qui Valentinianorum placita omnia evertit. Sed summa absurditas ejusmodi commentorum facilem ei victoriam fecit, ad summam rei quod adtinet, et in singularibus quoque multis capitibus. Diffitere tamen non possumus, quin subinde infirmis argumentis utatur; quod de *Justini Martyris* confutatione Judaeorum, in Dialogo cum *Tryphone*, nemo etiam negaverit, a quo paulo studiosius in libellus lectus sit.[72]

[In the second century especially, as we shall see, there began to appear heretics of various kinds, whom right-thinking Christians confuted without difficulty by citing Scripture; as we see done by Irenaeus, who destroyed every claim of the Valentinians. But the utter absurdity of positions of this kind rendered his victory an easy one, as regards its central assumption and in many several chapters. We cannot doubt, however, that unsound arguments were frequently employed, as by Justin Martyr confuting the Jews in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, which nobody can deny who has read his book with any attention.]

This is a significantly compressed passage. There may have been heresies arising from simple misunderstanding, and the replies to them may have come not from Scripture but from the same confused discourse as that which gave them birth. This is central to Le Clerc's argument for toleration. The *absurditas* of the Valentinians, however, does not arise from the essentialism denounced by Hobbes, but – as we see again and again – from something so far-fetched that Le Clerc can hardly imagine how the human mind can have thought of it, and this may lie outside the debate over toleration altogether. Irenaeus is constantly dragging gnosticism into the *Historia Ecclesiastica* and obliging Le Clerc to take notice of it. Meanwhile, we have returned to a familiar theme: the advent of an unnecessary theology, largely but not wholly Platonic in origin, which entangles the original

[71] Ibid., pp. 530–1. [72] Ibid. 532.

gospel in meaningless distinctions. For Arthur Bury, the shadow of the Crescent here fell across the page. Le Clerc, providing a coherent history of religion, offers a more consoling account, and here brings in Providence, which ensures that the original (if not the Naked) Gospel survives all this nonsense and will do so *ad finem omnium rerum*. If we ask how this is effected, the answer no doubt lies in part in the continued presence of both Scriptures; but it lies also in the uncomplicated piety of the Christian *plebs*, who continue to believe what they can understand and practise its morality better than their betters.

Sic *unum Deum*, proprio sensu, admisit et adoravit plebs, dum subtiliores aequo Theologi, inter se, de *unitatis* Dei ratione contenderent, remque ipsam, quam Religionis magistri recta via non investigabant, incolumem conservavit.[73]

[Thus the people acknowledged and worshipped one God, properly understood, while the more subtle theologians argued among themselves about his unity; and so saved intact the matter itself, which leaders of religion on the true path did not enquire into.]

But Le Clerc accepted the Incarnation and the Trinity; the honest *plebs* had to hear of these and know (*proprio sensu*) what they meant. Divine Providence could not dispense with human speech; *ratio* and *sermo* could not do without *verbum*. Meanwhile, in the second century, the Christian religion is not only being preserved, but is rapidly spreading. Le Clerc has earlier told us that this too was the special care of Providence; he now gives a list of four active forces, which may be compared with the five given by Gibbon. The growth of the Church was encouraged:

1. reliquiis quibusdam miraculorum, quae a postremis Apostolorum Discipulis perpetrabantur; 2. confutatione Ethnicismi, quae facillior erat, animosque vacillantium Ethnicorum percellebat, quamvis forte Christiana Religio non eo modo exponeretur, quo debuisset, neque aptis argumentis semper firmaretur; 3. morte Christianorum, quam alacriter obibant, potius quam, Religione Christiana violata, Ethnicorum cultus divini participes fierent; 4. denique vita et moribus Christianorum, qui quamvis olim, ut hodie, in multis delinquerent, Ethnicis tamen multo meliores erant, et mutua praesertim caritate se invicem ita complectebantur, ut adversariis mirabiles essent, et se vicissim per omnia adjuvarent.[74]

[1. by certain miracles remaining, of those worked by the last disciples of the Apostles; 2. by the confutation of the pagans, which easily overcame their wavering minds, though perhaps the Christian religion was not expounded as it ought to have been, or always supported by sound arguments; 3. by the death which Christians so eagerly sought, rather than abandon their faith by taking part in

[73] Ibid., p. 538. [74] Ibid., pp. 533–4.

pagan worship; 4. lastly, by the life and morals of the Christians, who, though then as now delinquent in many things, were nevertheless far superior to the pagans, and joined in bonds of charity, which made them marvellous to their enemies and aided them in every way.]

There is a lengthy footnote[75] explaining, with support from Origen and Augustine, the caution with which Le Clerc accepts that a few miracles were still occurring; and the remark that Christianity was often promoted by unsatisfactory arguments reinforces what he has said about both the Fathers and the work of Providence. These are for the most part secondary causes not unlike those listed by Gibbon, especially the last, which is Gibbon's fourth; but it seems to be Le Clerc's position that each one of them is supported and promoted by an active divine agency in bringing about the growth of the Church. It was Gibbon's refusal to take this agency seriously that offended readers of his fifteenth and sixteenth chapters.

(v) philosophy and persecution; the *historia* breaks off

Le Clerc, however, does not supply a history of his four causes in operation, and only to a limited extent does the *Historia Ecclesiastica* develop a history of persecution. From Nero and Domitian he proceeds to Trajan and Pliny, noting Tertullian's criticism of the inconsistencies of imperial policy;[76] but soon we return to the heresies, and the problem of Le Clerc's understanding of this subject. Irenaeus re-asserts his textual predominance, and Le Clerc follows in appalled detail his accounts of the Basilideans and Valentinians;[77] appalled, however, less by their blasphemies than by their absurdities. He reproduces Irenaeus's accounts of the aeonic genealogies and theogonies: Ialdabaoth and Achamoth, Barbelo and Sophia, Monogenes and Logos; pausing more than once to remark that it is hard to believe that sane minds have taken all this seriously,[78] and to ponder whether Irenaeus himself truly understood what he was reporting.[79] The failure is one of *critique*: if he had cited his documents we should have been better assured, not only of his reliability but of his critical rationality. Above and behind the aeonic genealogies, the product of syncretism rather than superstition,[80] Irenaeus's text affords an account of Bythos and Pleroma[81] – the unmoved God who does not stoop to creation and is silence rather than word; but Le Clerc, though he quotes Ignatius as saying *Christum esse Verbum Dei*

[75] Ibid., n. 30. [76] Ibid., pp. 546–52. [77] Ibid., pp. 577–86, 608–9, 645–65, 668–71.
[78] Ibid., pp. 482, 485, 583, 660 ('taedet jam dudum me Valentinianorum, et ut puto, Lectores meos').
[79] Ibid., p. 671. [80] Ibid., pp. 482, 586. [81] Ibid., pp. 581–3.

aeternum, *non e silentio progressum*,[82] seems not to explore very deeply the theme that gnostics denied the creation to be the work of God,[83] or that they shared this denial with much in Greek philosophy. The 'heresies' described by Irenaeus – though for Le Clerc they were not heresies in the ordinary sense, but doctrines outside Christianity altogether – are never systematised, but remain a tissue of fantasies for which he can imagine no rational or historical explanation.

Justin Martyr[84] stands beside Irenaeus as a dominant figure of the second century. His *Dialogue with Trypho* is not only a classic of Christian–Jewish debate, but his originary statement of the relation between revelation and philosophy. Though there are accounts of the errors into which ignorance of Hebrew and acceptance of Platonism combined to lead him, he anticipates Augustine in saying that philosophy can teach us everything about the knowledge of God except the experience of knowing him. The revealed Christ furnishes that knowledge, but we are left trying to say what that knowledge is. Philosophy is both orthodox and unorthodox, and Justin and Irenaeus are left trying to formulate an orthodoxy that has not yet coalesced into statement. Le Clerc gave a long account of Irenaeus's views on the nature of God,[85] from which we see that the Arminian author was still trying to present Incarnation and Trinity as in some sort inherent in the primary revelation, awaiting the time, which perhaps had never come, when Christian language should be capable of articulating them. It is likely that this is one of the moments at which Pierre Bayle and Jean Le Clerc parted company and became enemies.

Philosophy continues to play a central and paradoxical role in Christian history. There is an ironic moment – though irony may not have been Le Clerc's *forte* – near the end of this volume, when Justin, the first philosopher to be a Christian and the first Christian to be a philosopher, suffers a martyr's death in a persecution launched by Marcus Aurelius, so far the only emperor to be a philosopher, to whom (together with his senior colleague) Justin has addressed the first of his Apologies. Le Clerc pauses to explain why Marcus's Stoicism does not meet Christian goals,[86] but is rather less incisive than Tillemont in explaining how philosophy can lead to persecution. There is one more irony, apparent only to a reader of

[82] Ibid., p. 565.
[83] He mentions the themes of the two principles and the origins of evil, but says he will defer the matter until he comes to deal with Manichaeism (ibid., pp. 647–8). He never reached this point.
[84] Ibid., pp. 614–31.
[85] Ibid., pp. 758–83. He appears as an authority establishing the canon in the first of these pages.
[86] Ibid., pp. 693–5.

histories; the last secular event in the *Historia Ecclesiastica* is the murder of Commodus in the year 192,[87] the moment at which Gibbon began his narrative of the disintegration of the Antonine monarchy. James Chelsum, one of Gibbon's critics, insisted that Gibbon's ecclesiastical history must be read as beginning at the same date, and so could bear no relation to Christian history before the third century.[88] He should therefore have held that the *Historia Ecclesiastica* played no part in Gibbon's fifteenth and sixteenth chapters, but we know from Gibbon's text and notes that this cannot have been so. Gibbon had no intention of writing about the apostolic age, but that of the Fathers could well have attracted him. It is, however, the case that if the 'two hundred and fifty years' mentioned at the outset of his chapter 47[89] conclude with the Council of Chalcedon in 451, that chapter too begins about the point where the *Historia Ecclesiastica* leaves off. As for Le Clerc, he indicates an intention of continuing his history through the third and fourth centuries and evidently meant to go further;[90] why he did not, in the years remaining before he was disabled by a stroke in 1728, must await his next biographer. There remains the question what Gibbon could have learned from the *Historia Ecclesiastica* regarding the transitions from the Apostles to the Fathers and from gnosticism to Platonism.

[87] Ibid., p. 798. [88] Below, p. 318. [89] Above, p. 90.

[90] HE, p. 795. See also his foreword to the first issue of the *Bibliothèque ancienne et moderne*, 1714 (BAM, 1, sig. ∗2): 'L'*Histoire ecclesiastique* des VI premiers siecles, que j'ai entrepris d'écrire en Latin, et dont le premier est presque achevé.'

CHAPTER 5

Isaac de Beausobre: heresy, philosophy, history

(1) BEAUSOBRE AND GIBBON: THE OCCASIONAL PRESENCE

Beausobre's *Histoire de Manichée et du Manichéisme* (1734–9) is an exception among Gibbon's sources for the Church before Constantine in that, unlike the works of Fleury, Tillemont, Le Clerc or Mosheim, it is not a *historia ecclesiastica* though it is a contribution to that field of study. That is to say, it is not a history of the Church as an organised body, divine and human; it has no narrative structure and does not, like Eusebius, Tillemont or as we shall see Mosheim, consider how such a history should be written in terms of the experiences the Church underwent and the characteristics it acquired as a result. There is nothing about the persecutions, or the transmission and construction of authority. What it has in common with the other histories Gibbon read is a concern with heresy, and therefore with orthodoxy, as phenomena whose presence in Christian history needs to be explained and understood; and it shares with other texts of the Protestant early Enlightenment a tendency to question this presence and lessen the rigour with which heresy and orthodoxy can be defined, condemned or upheld.

The heresies (as he does not hesitate to call them) that concern Beausobre in the history of the second and third centuries are those known as 'gnostic' and described by Irenaeus, Epiphanius and other Fathers. He approaches them by way of an overmastering concern with the phenomenon of Manichaeism, which he considers the culmination of what they represent; but since he is writing a history of Manichaeism and not of the Church, he does not proceed in narrative sequence to the heresies of Sabellianism and Arianism, arising within a discourse of Christ's nature from which gnosticism and dualism had been largely excluded. It was controversy over Arianism that led to the Council of Nicaea; but Beausobre does not arrive at this episode, looking instead beyond it to the career and writings of Augustine, in which Manichaeism played so important a part.

Gibbon was never anxious to accord Augustine too prominent a role,[1] but Arius, Athanasius and Nicaea provide a turning point in the history of the Church under Constantine. We shall find that it was the Arian debate that Gibbon chose to set at the centre of the complex relation between theology and philosophy; and it is therefore a problem to determine whether any role in his narrative is played by gnosticism and by Beausobre's massive treatment of this as part of his subject. The problem deepens when we find that Gibbon's interest in Beausobre's book can be documented and extends over the greater part of his authorial career.

Gibbon's first mention in print of Beausobre's work occurs in a footnote to the *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*, where it is bracketed with Conyers Middleton's *Free Enquiry into the Miraculous Powers* as 'deux beaux monumens d'un siècle éclairé'.[2] We need not conclude from this that Gibbon thought of Beausobre as sharing the intentions that had made Middleton's work a scandal; the reference occurs in a rather different context. The *Essai* goes on to speak of the difficulties of understanding a past religion when it is known to us only from the writings of its enemies – a recurrent theme with Le Clerc – and further footnotes mention Justin Martyr, Fleury, d'Herbelot and Warburton,[3] evidence that Gibbon was reading such authors at this early time. The text of the *Essai*, however, deals with pre-Christian religion primarily under the heading of polytheism: the heading under which he chose to consider Roman religion in its political character. This is not Beausobre's theme, as we shall see; his book is devoted to the theology generated by pre-Christian philosophy, and the category so named leads into an altogether different historiography. Gibbon knew already, and the *Decline and Fall* later tells us, that there was a problematic relation between cultic polytheism and the philosophy the Romans learned from the Greeks, and the first of the journals he kept after his return to England shows him working on this while serving in the militia and preparing the *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature* for publication. He there records that in order to understand 'the Systems of Paganism' for his *Essai*, he began reading Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, a work whose Academic scepticism figured in all Gibbon's treatments of polytheism, but followed it immediately with

> Beausobre's *Histoire du Manichéisme* as the most candid account of the ancient Philosophical Theology both in itself and as blended with Christianity.[4]

[1] Womersley, 1994, III, pp. 1193–4. [2] MW, IV, p. 70.

[3] Ibid., IV, pp. 71–2 (footnotes unnumbered and indicated by asterisks).

[4] *Journal A*, pp. 22–3; EEG, p. 122. In Memoir B (A, pp. 173–4) he imagines 'science and superstition' originating together in India and flowing westward towards Greece; an account of superstition more historical and less philosophical than Hume's.

This journal entry is dated 23 February 1761; and reviewing his reading at the end of that year, Gibbon mentions 'the great philosophical and Theological work of M. de Beausobre'.[5] 'Great' is not an adjective he used lightly; we have so far found it applied only to Tacitus and Joseph de Guignes,[6] years later; and here it suggests that Gibbon was turning, perhaps momentarily, from polytheism to philosophy, and from Cicero to Pythagoras, Zoroaster and Plato – for these shape Beausobre's subject. At Lausanne again in 1764, we find him reading the *Bibliothèque raisonnée*'s excerpts from Beausobre and – it is no accident – Mosheim's Latin translation of Cudworth's *Intellectual System of the Universe*.[7] And as we have already seen, Beausobre, together with Le Clerc and Mosheim, is the subject of centrally important footnotes to the *Decline and Fall* in 1776 and 1788. The *Histoire du Manichéisme* was with Gibbon from the beginning to the end, but it is not a simple matter to see why, since a massive return from Beausobre to Cicero, and from philosophy to polytheism, will figure in our reading of chapter 15.[8]

(II) PROTESTANT HISTORY AND HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

Beausobre was a Protestant from Niort in Poitou, trained and ordained for the ministry at the Academy of Saumur.[9] When he decided to join the *Réfuge* in the 1680s, he made use of connections with several Protestant princesses concerned with piety and learning, and therefore with philosophy. The princess of Orange secured him an appointment as chaplain to the princess of Anhalt-Dessau, which he held from 1686 to 1694, moving to Berlin, where he was chaplain to the queen, Sophie Charlotte. In this capacity he held, in 1701, an unsatisfactory debate before the electress of Hanover, the queen's mother, with John Toland,[10] who carried methodical scepticism to one of its extremes by declining to take any position he was prepared to uphold in a disputation or *conférence*. Beausobre held a number of administrative posts and was preacher of a mainly Huguenot congregation, which occupied him to the end of his long life in 1738.[11]

[5] *Journal A*, p. 44. [6] BSE, pp. 85, 110.

[7] *Journal B*, p. 9. For the *Bibliothèque raisonnée*, see ibid, n. 1.

[8] There are references to Beausobre in the *Autobiographies*: A, pp. 191 (Memoir B), 257 (Memoir C), 332 (Memoir F) and 412 (Memoir D). In the first of these Gibbon says he has enlarged his reflections 'beyond the holy circle of the author', a remark more prejudiced than fair.

[9] A biography is prefixed to the second (posthumous) volume of the HMM (II, pp. i–viii). It is thought to be the work of Samuel Formey, literary agent to the Berlin Huguenots.

[10] Champion, 2003, p. 168. Beausobre does not seem to mention Toland or the English deists in the HMM.

[11] HMM, II, pp. iv–vi. Some editions seem to lack Formey's *éloge*; Schwarzbach, 1995, p. 109 n. 1.

He therefore ranks as a leading figure of the *Réfuge* in Berlin, a group which included at one time or another such luminaries as Jean Barbeyrac, the Swiss exile from Calvinist rigour[12] who played an important part in the growth of modern natural law, and Simon Pelloutier, the historian of the Celts in primeval Europe.[13] Beausobre is an actor who needs to be carefully located, and the history of learning in his time provides a means of doing so.

There were two processes in train that assist us in understanding the kind of historian he became. One was the great debate, beginning in the 1680s, between Catholic and Protestant church historians, in which Bossuet's *Histoire des variations des églises protestantes* and Maimbourg's *Histoire du Calvinisme* were answered by such works as Gilbert Burnet's *History of the Reformation in England* and Jacques Basnage's *Histoire des églises reformées* and, more marginally, his *Histoire des juifs*.[14] The critical journalism of Le Clerc and Bayle arose in this setting, and it can be said of the Protestant historians that they supplemented if they did not replace theology with a history of doctrine which was more than an ancillary to the former. Within this debate over relatively modern church history there arose a debate over toleration, in which both sides adopted the strategy of representing the earliest Christian history as a record of the slow and hesitant formation of doctrine, hoping thereby to leave either the authority of the Church or the believer's encounter with Scripture in a primary position. Beausobre was involved in this ongoing debate; he was engaged in writing a history of the Reformation when his attention was drawn to Manichaeism, with the result that he left his original project unpublished at his death. He tells us how this diversion occurred; it had a lengthy genesis.

The Huguenot circle in Berlin, composed of Arminian Calvinists shaped by the controversies in the further west of Europe, was affected by the intellectual debates going on within German Lutheranism. Here, it may be said, the *Réfuge* encountered the *Frühaufklärung*; we have to do with another republic of letters and another approach to Enlightenment, and need to see how they differed in order to see how they affected one another. Beausobre was a historian, and the German early Enlightenment included debates which shaped the writing and understanding of history, and with which he was not unacquainted. These debates had to do with the historiography of philosophy. Those constructing a new understanding of natural law wrote

[12] EEG, pp. 69, 83–5, 264.

[13] For Pelloutier and his setting see Kidd, 1999, pp. 189–93. For the Berlin *Réfuge* in general, Pott, Mulsow and Danneburg, 2003.

[14] Perry, 1993; Belgrano, 2004.

histories of the changing character of their subject in ancient, medieval and post-Reformation times – it might be premature to use the word 'modern' – and these were not without effect on histories of philosophy being constructed for a diversity of other reasons.[15] The ancient histories of philosophy on which scholars still relied – those by Diogenes Laertius and Clement of Alexandria – were doxographic in structure, tabulations of schools (*sectae*, *haereseis*), their members and their opinions; but they had been set going by philosophers who in antiquity had been known as 'eclectics', meaning that they were prepared to survey all doctrines proffered, and select and recombine those which they approved. From this it was not impossible that something like a critical history of philosophy might develop, as it began to do in the writings of 'modern' scholars in this period. They admired the works of the ancient 'eclectics' to the point where they became known by the same name, but went beyond them in enquiring why the ancients had written and been read as they had, and how doctrines had been shaped by debate between and among the various schools.[16] What became known as *historia critica philosophiae* took shape in the period between Thomas Stanley's *History of Philosophy* (1655), which still reads not unlike an English Diogenes Laertius, and Johann Jakob Brucker's great *Historia Critica* of 1742–4, the culmination of the trend described, a work known to Beausobre in its genesis,[17] and Gibbon in its completion.[18]

It is important to see how the increasingly historical 'eclecticism' of the 'moderns' could lend itself to the critical study of Christian theology favoured by the partisans of toleration. It was an easy step from treating each philosopher as expounding aspects of the truth in his own times to presenting each Father – and, just conceivably, each Evangelist – as expressing an original revelation as best he could; the implication being that every expression was relative and contingent and should both give and receive respect among those striving to express truth. This came to be Beausobre's position as it had been Le Clerc's; whether it was the end he designed his writings to reach is of course a further question.

[15] Santinello, 1979–81; Tuck, 1979; Sorell, 1993; Hochstrasser, 2000; Kelley, 2002.

[16] Kelley, 2002.

[17] HMM, II, p. 153 n. 9: 'M. *Brucker*, Pasteur à Keusbeuren, Ville Impériale de Suabe, et Auteur de l'*Histoire des idées et de l'histoire des philosophes et de la philosophie*. (This would obviously not be "history of ideas" in a modern sense.) Voyez sa Dissert. *De Convenient. Numeror. Pythag. Cum Ideis Platonis*. Elle est dans la collection de M. *Schelhorn* intitulée *Amoenitates Litterariae* T. vii. P. 220.' See also ibid., pp. 168, 312 n. 1.

[18] Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1200.

He shows a real if cautious interest[19] in Gottfried Arnold's 'impartial history of heresies',[20] which had appeared thirty years before. Arnold's thesis of a recurrent hardening of belief towards a mechanical orthodoxy, renewed and revitalised by an equally recurrent evangelism, would certainly appeal to him, but his sense of religion is intellectual as well as experiential. He thinks it possible, and important, to be right about what Christ was and is, and therefore possible to be wrong; but the endeavour to be right is a difficult one, and goes on in a history it shares with those who may have been wrong but should often be respected. His Catholic opponents in this enterprise – apart from the always ambivalent Richard Simon – are Bossuet and Tillemont. He admires the scholarship of each, but considers the former pernicious and the latter excessive in his orthodoxy. This was also Gibbon's judgement.

We now turn to his account of the genesis of his *Histoire de Manichée et du Manichéisme*, to see how it brings together the trends towards a different kind of historiography. He tells us[21] that, in preparing his history of the Reformation, he was led by others to consider the sects of medieval dissenters, and enquire whether these had been precursors of Protestantism as Catholic scholars charged, and whether Protestants should be willing to accept them as such. Two sects were prominent, the Vaudois or Waldensians, and the Albigensians. The former still existed and had fought not unsuccessfully for their survival;[22] it was possible to ask and discover what they believed. The Albigensians were another matter; they had been destroyed by a crusade in the thirteenth century, and could be known only from the records and histories put together by those who had suppressed them. The latter regularly accused them of Manichaean dualism, and of the usual nameless orgies along with it. The same, under investigation, proved to be true of the Manichaeans of antiquity; we knew of them chiefly what their enemies had said of them, and a tolerationist rhetoric might open up from the discovery of this truth.

Beausobre therefore set himself to pursue two lines of research. The lesser was to discover what could be known of the Albigensians, and the sects said to have preceded them in their Manichaeism and its transmission to Latin Christendom. There appeared a lineage, looking back to Bogomils, Paulicians and other heretics said to have been Manichaean in eastern church history. Beausobre wrote essays on several of these, some published and others not at his death; it was thought that they might have formed a

[19] HMM, I, pp. 25 n. 8, 74–239. He remarks that Arnold wrote in German; he may have known his work chiefly from Christian Thomasius's defence of it against many attackers.
[20] Arnold, 1699–1700. [21] HMM, I, pp. iii–v. [22] Marshall, 2006, pp. 55–61.

third volume of the *Histoire de Manichée* and linked it with his *Histoire de la reformation*.[23] There is a remarkable similarity between this project and the 54th chapter of the *Decline and Fall*, which provides the Reformation with the same pedigree. The greater of Beausobre's two fields of research, however, is his history of Manichaeism in the ancient world, before and after the victory of Constantine, which dominated and perhaps obsessed his work for the remainder of his life.

Beausobre wrote a massive history – it would be fair if facetious to say that his second volume contains everything one could possibly want to know about Manichaean doctrine and practice – directed at the historiography of philosophy; but of a philosophy not merely ancient, but archaic and alien by the accepted standards of 'ancient' philosophy as generally understood. For this reason he has received little attention, whether from historians or from philosophers. He does not appear, except incidentally, in the recent literature studying the origins of the historiography of philosophy; perhaps because that literature is centred on the transition from 'ancient', meaning medieval, philosophy to 'modern', the central theme of the historiography of philosophy in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, in which Beausobre showed, to us, surprisingly little interest. Perhaps the reason for the modern indifference is that such a historiography is still seen as incidental to the history of philosophy, as written by philosophers. Beausobre was interested in the history of philosophy, in a sense so broad as to be almost Eurasian, as preceding and shaping the history of Christian theology, Christian belief and the Christian gospel; and he defined 'philosophy' as a series of already existing intellectual positions which the Christian evangel had encountered from the first moments of its mission. Gibbon seems to have perceived this in his earliest researches, and we now have to see what history, and what historiography, arose as Beausobre defined his project to himself.

(iii) the problem of creation: gnosticism, platonism and atheism

Before the Protestants the Albigensians? The first link in the chain was the weakest, and the most likely to be repudiated by the author. Before the Albigensians the Manichaeans; before the Manichaeans the gnostics; before the gnostics the archaic philosophers. Constructing this retrospective sequence, Beausobre became a historian, if not of the Church then of

[23] HMM, II, pp. iv–vi (Formey?).

Christianity in its early centuries, for the most part prior to Constantine and the Council of Nicaea; the one massive exception occurring when the study of Manichaeism became inseparable from the study of Augustine.[24] With the latter Gibbon was not much concerned, and we are at present looking at Beausobre's place in pre-Nicene history as Gibbon understood it; a history in which the gnostics play a central, if elusive and problematic, role. Beausobre was led to construct his retrospect by the circumstance that he became preoccupied with the phenomena of Manichaeism, but he further became persuaded of two general propositions: one, that Mani and Manichaeism could not be understood without study of the gnostic persuasions preceding them; the other, that the full range of phenomena before him could be understood in the light of a single hypothesis about the relations between the Christian gospel and 'philosophy' – a term he conceived so broadly as to make it cover the known ancient world.

Beausobre – always concerned with Manichaeism, not Arianism[25] – thought that a complete narrative and treatment could be supplied by making a single assumption: that Christians had been the first, and remained the only, philosophers to believe in the possibility of creation *ex nihilo*. All other philosophers had believed matter to be uncreated, and this promise had urged their thought in directions that might end in dualism or non-theist monism. Their assumptions and conclusions had been hard to expel from Christian thought itself, once it had engaged with philosophy; here might be found the sources of many if not all Christian heresies, in particular the evident dualism of the Manichaeans and the gnostic denial that creation was the work of a primal God. Beausobre set out to expound this history in detail, and began by surveying the diversities of ancient philosophy as its many forms pursued the implications of an imperfect creation. He extended his survey eastward from Greece – which he thought indebted to Egypt for its philosophy[26] – to the Persian world of Zoroaster and the *philosophia orientalis* or *barbarica*, and beyond it to a dimly perceived India and China. His sources for the latter were not the best then available, and his thinking is not free of older Christian assumptions about post-diluvian 'Gentile' philosophy, in which Pythagoras played a leading role. The works he cites on 'oriental' subjects included those which the young

[24] For Beausobre's engagement with Augustine, see ibid., I, pp. 3–4, 227–32, 266–7, 285–6, 338, 477–87, 490–4, 502–5, II, pp. 334–8, 339–44, 387–9, 399–403, 433–8 (Book VII, chapter II), 453–5, 470–87 (chapter IV), 489–90, 584, 629–30, 669–82, 714–15, 738–41.

[25] His discussion of the Arian controversy occurs in Book III, chapter V (ibid., I, pp. 527–43), and is aimed at showing that all agreed that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, but that there was an unmanageable diversity of ways of saying what this meant.

[26] Ibid., II, p. 167.

Gibbon would be studying twenty years later: d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque orientale*,[27] Pocock's translation of Abulpharagius,[28] Hyde on the ancient religion of the Persians;[29] but also Lacroze's *Histoire du christianisme des Indes*,[30] which Gibbon admired,[31] and the work of the Maronite Christian Joseph Asseman,[32] of which Beausobre feelingly remarks 'j'ai vu, j'ai parcouru, j'ai meme lu les quatre premiers volumes de sa riche Bibliothèque Orientale',[33] words which a reader of Beausobre himself may wish to repeat. Around these citations grows up a thick forest of critical literature, French, German and English, since there were many scholars concerned with the problems he was labouring to isolate and explain.[34]

All ancient philosophy proceeded from the dogma that *ex nihilo nihil fit*;[35] but nearly all ancient philosophy had supposed something in the nature of God. It had supposed intelligibility and therefore intelligence to be inherent in the structure of reality, and to be the active source of that which it was able to explain. Intelligence had therefore created the universe, but – here was the stumbling block – could not have created it out of nothing. There must therefore be that which preceded creation and made it possible; a primary reality or substance that had not been created. The relation between creation and the uncreated had now to be explored, but at this point arose the further assumption that 'matter' – the name given to uncreated substance – was imperfect, both before and after the work of creation, containing both the physical ills and the moral evils inseparable from material existence. The formal problems of explaining a creation that was less than absolute were complicated by the moral problems of explaining a universe that was less than perfectly good. We may recall Gibbon's remark that Zoroastrian dualism had been 'a bold and injudicious attempt of eastern philosophy'[36] to explain the existence of evil. It might be done by supposing two creative energies, the one good and the other malevolent; but Beausobre, having Hyde to rely on and living well

[27] EEG, pp. 29, 30, 40, 82; *Library*, p. 148; Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1225.
[28] EEG, pp. 41, 42; *Library*, p. 63 (Bar Hebraeus); Womersley, 1994, III, pp. 1187, 1252.
[29] BSE, p. 26; *Letters*, p. 157; Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1227.
[30] Lacroze, 1724. (His companion *Histoire du christianisme d'Ethiopie* appeared after Beausobre's death, in 1739.) There is mention (I, pp. 169–70) of a personal communication he made to Beausobre. See also I, p. 365.
[31] Womersley, 1994, III, pp. 1231–2; *Library*, p. 170.
[32] Asseman[us], 1719–28; *Library*, p. 58; Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1193.
[33] HMM, I, p. 147.
[34] Some of these – ecclesiastical historians as well as orientalists – figure in Gibbon's footnotes and are treated with respect. See, e.g., Womersley, 1994, III, pp. 1215–16 (Johann Albert Fabricius), 1256–7 (Adrien Roland, Eusèbe Renaudot).
[35] The point is first made in Beausobre's preface (HMM, I, pp. xviii–xix) and recurs regularly in the 1,300 pages of his two volumes.
[36] Womersley, 1994, I, p. 216; BSE, p. 32.

before Anquetil-Duperron, insisted that magian thought was not simply dualist, and that a source of intelligible reality had existed before Ormuzd and Ahriman emanated from it. Gibbon wondered how this might be described.[37]

The system of philosophy best known to Christians in the west of Eurasia for its approach to these problems was that set out in Plato's *Timaeus*, as interpreted by the Platonists of Alexandria.[38] Here the role of creator was played by Demiurgus, a being derived or descended from the primary absolute called God, and the work of creation had been the imposition of form, order and meaning on the uncreated chaos of substance – or of pre-substance, if 'substance' were taken to signify an ordering category or principle. This Demiurgus had been a creator not of matter but of meaning, and it could be argued that nothing had existed before him in the sense that nothing could be said to have existed. But there had been a condition preceding meaning and existence, and there were those unwilling to distinguish between the chaos (there were words for it in many languages), in which being was inseparable from non-being, and the God (if God were the right word) from whom Demiurgus, Ormuzd and even Ahriman had descended as ordering principles. Theism and non-theism merged in a primary reality which might as well be called 'nothing' or 'non-being', since any statement of existence must diminish the absolute; and this possibility did not disappear even when the primary reality was termed God and Father, and the creative agency descending from him was called his Son. Beausobre found himself exploring a number of theologies and theogonies in which language had been used in this way, and the language of the Gospels itself pointed to the necessity of doing so. In one of these, Plato was taken to have been the author of a trinity in which God was the Father, the creator Demiurgus was his Son, and a continuing source of energy his Spirit; a system which did much to define the Christian Trinity of which it gave an inadequate account. It had to be decided whether Platonism overcame or continued the shortcomings of ancient philosophy.

He did not question that Mani had acquired from Zoroaster a belief in two warring principles of spirit and matter, good and evil; but he denied that Ormuzd and Ahriman were the names of two equal and primary gods. Before them both was that from which they were descended, and the

[37] Ibid., in both texts cited.

[38] In all that follows, 'Plato' denotes the Plato presented by Middle Platonists and neo-Platonists. The reader is warned that I do not offer to state the distinctions between 'Platonism' and the positions taken by Plato himself. See now Edwards, 2006.

question was whether that might be termed God, a source of both being and meaning. Here it was not enough for Beausobre to explore the theistics or theology of Zoroaster. He was pursuing, from his initial assumptions, a history of Christian heresy and orthodoxy, both of them consequent on statements about the nature of creation; and the figures with whom he had now to deal were the various schools of gnosticism described by Irenaeus and others, and by him, as 'the precursors of Manichaeus'.[39] They had not been magian dualists, but something stranger and more difficult to explain. The claim hardest for a Christian, with his complex Jewish and Gentile heritage, to confront was the recurrent assertion that the world as we knew and suffered it was not the creation of God, but of a subordinate being or angel who had made the world with all its defects, given it the Mosaic law, and taken the Jews as his chosen people. From this merger of Lucifer[40] and Jehovah the Father and the Spirit had joined to liberate the enlightened, by sending the Christ who descended upon Jesus and made him the vehicle of the *gnōsis*. It was a doctrine more cosmically anti-Jewish than anything in orthodox Christianity, but its challenge ran deeper still. If the creation had been an act of disobedience to God, what could possibly be God's relation to creation?

Here Beausobre's analyses of the gnostic schools extended their scholarly reach. He based them on a set of texts which have not so far appeared in these chapters: the pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* and *Homilies*, written in the second or third century and edited by Jean-Baptiste Cotelier in a work of 1724;[41] they were known to Jean Le Clerc but not significantly used in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* of 1716. They offer two versions of what Beausobre correctly described as a *roman philosophique*,[42] of a kind common in late antiquity; Philostratus's life of Apollonius of Tyana is a specimen, and the blasphemous endeavoured to say the same of the Four Gospels (three of which have little philosophic content). The tale is told by a certain Clement, who attaches himself to Peter at the time of the latter's contest with Simon Magus. The setting is not Rome, and Peter and Simon hold a long philosophical debate of considerable coherence. After that fiction is resumed, and Clement rediscovers his long-lost father, who is bewitched by the sorcerer and delivered by the Apostle. Beausobre, who had an early

[39] HMM, II, p. 2; 'dessein de ce Livre' (Book IV, chapters I–IX).

[40] For Lucifer, the long quotation from Leibniz at HMM, II, pp. 95–6. The issue is whether the creative spirit emanating from God was himself corrupted by pride in his own work – Satan as fallen creator – or was joined and opposed by a hostile spirit born of the confusions of matter: the originating idea of all dualisms. The context here is Beausobre's discussion of the heretic Marcion.

[41] Cotelier, 1724.

[42] HMM, I, p. 34, II, p. 329, and at many other points.

modern understanding of the relation between imaginative and historical writing, was prepared to dismiss the fiction while accepting the debate with Peter as a reliable account of the doctrine of a philosopher of the period[43] – half sage and half charlatan – to whom the name of Simon Magus might be accorded, though he insisted that there was no reason to identify him with the Simon of Acts.[44] There remained a way of historicising the legend of Simon Magus as the source of all gnostic heresies.

The pseudo-Clementine Simon becomes a key figure in Beausobre's history of philosophy, because – real or fictitious – he can be made a type of 'Platonic' philosopher. Plato is the heir of Pythagoras,[45] and Pythagoras is said to have anticipated Manichaeism[46] (though never Spinoza – we shall see why this is important). That is to say, he opposes an active principle of matter to the active intelligence of God. This degree of dualism is not attributed to Plato, but he is said (with reference to the *Timaeus*) to have held that God is the father of spiritual and eternal beings, but only the shaper of material and mortal beings;[47] and the task of giving form to matter is deputed to the Demiurgus or 'second Dieu'.[48] This is the Platonist version of the universal philosophic dogma that matter cannot have been created, and that creation, or rather formation, is a secondary and imperfect activity left to a secondary deity. On the other hand, form is a higher reality than matter, and the action of the Demiurgus can be called creation, though it acts upon chaos and never upon nothingness. The primary godhead is intellectual and always potentially, if not actually, active and communicative; God acts through his minister to make the world known to itself. Beausobre is setting Platonism on Justin's road towards the knowledge of Christ the Logos; but Simon falls short of this, partly by representing himself as an emanated being or aeon – never, it is insisted, as the Father or the Son[49] – but perhaps more by the emphasis he places on the absolute self-sufficiency of God, who is the meaning of his own existence and contains all being within himself. This being so, it must be asked, why should God create? Why should he wish to communicate himself as intelligibility to lesser beings, created in order to have an imperfect (if perhaps perfectible) knowledge of him in return for the imperfections of being? The dualist answer was that God confronted matter which he had not created but could render intelligible: if that were rejected, the question must recur of why God had created a creator less than himself. There were various answers. In some gnostic schemes, lesser

[43] For Beausobre's justification of this reading, see HMM, I, p. 37. [44] Ibid., I, pp. 259, 322–3.
[45] Ibid., I, pp. 479, 494. [46] Ibid., I, pp. 29–33, II, pp. 153–5. [47] Ibid., I, pp. 559–60.
[48] Ibid., I, pp. 379, 560. [49] Ibid., I, pp, 37, 257–60, II, pp. 13–14, 322–3.

beings, in need of a creation other than themselves, seemed to emanate[50] from the primary godhead by a kind of cosmic cellular fission, scaling down from God towards the creation of creatures; so that the appalling thought might arise that the universe owed its being to the disintegration of God. Short of that, it must be supposed that an absolutely self-sufficient godhead had somehow willed or allowed the existence of beings other than itself, with whom there might be communication and interchange of knowledge; as if God, eternally active, was eternally self-alienating. The key term might be love; that 'eternity was in love with the products of time' could be a proposition closer to orthodox Christianity than William Blake perhaps intended it to be. But in the rhetoric of philosophy as Beausobre was using the term, there must be a great variety of tensions between the notion of God's absolute sufficiency and his allowance of a creation he did not, after all, immediately control. Hence – though this is to look beyond Beausobre – the paradox that only where there was nothing could there be God.

Beausobre, pursuing this problem as theologian, was obliged as historian to take account of the diversity of solutions that had been proposed. He wished to present Simon as a Platonist, not a Zoroastrian dualist like Mani; but when Simon appeared in the literature as gnostic rather than Platonist, he became involved in a variety of schemes – the Valentinian being the most outrageous – depicting the descent from God towards creation through a chain of emanated beings, each a little weaker and more deeply involved in matter than its predecessor. This became crucial in the legend of Simon Magus when he was linked with Helena,[51] whom he had found imprisoned in a brothel and represented as the gnostic Sophia, an aeonic being imprisoned in the flesh she had sought to liberate, the Lost Sheep whom he as Good Shepherd had been sent to find and bring home. Beausobre is ambivalent about Helena, showing a desire to eliminate her from the story or – we read without surprise – to represent her as masculine after all;[52] but he recognises that Simon and Helena may figure as the latest pair in a succession of emanated aeons, each personified and gendered into a masculine and feminine principle – again, we are not surprised to find him insisting that gender is not the same as sexuality.[53] He reviews the Valentinian system of the eight primary aeons, or Ogdoad, emphasising both that this is almost too bizarre to be studied and that it is ultimately

[50] There is no doubt an extensive literature, both ancient and modern, on the concept of emanation. This, since Beausobre does not seem to explore it, *je n'ai ni parcouru ni lu*. See, however, his note on Buddeus's explanation of how emanation might lead to Spinozism (below, n. 68.)

[51] HMM, I, p. 357, II, pp. 320–9. [52] Ibid., II, p. 329. [53] Ibid., I, pp. 582–6.

and consistently Platonist;[54] though as a mythology there is something un-Academic about it.

The primary godhead in this sequence consisted of the paired Bythos or Depth, the masculine principle, and Sigē or Silence, the feminine (silence was of course the virtue of women). Bythos stood for God's infinity, Sigē for God's self-sufficiency and uncommunicability. These are concepts of intellect rather than of substance; Beausobre denies that they correspond to Hesiod's Chaos and Night, or the abyss and darkness to be detected in the opening words of Genesis.[55] There ensue, however, a sequence of other pairs: Nous/Aletheia (knowledge and truth), Logos/Zoe (the word and the life it creates) and what Beausobre calls the 'idée chrétienne' of 'l'homme et l'église'.[56] The system is complete, but we are left asking by just what steps 'silence' is converted into 'word', uncommunicability into intelligibility and its necessary companion creativity. By making this the central paradox or mystery of Platonism, Beausobre has cleared the way to Platonism as the forerunner of Christianity, and the key word in effecting this transition is of course Logos. Even the mystagogue Valentinus is contained within the history of Christianity and defended against the wilder charges of Irenaeus and Epiphanius; but Beausobre has had to turn his face away from the gnostic narrative in which Christ descends upon Jesus to liberate mankind from the false creation wrought by the God of the Jews. These irenic intentions are by now central to his construction of the *Histoire de Manichée et du Manichéisme*.

It is easier to reconcile the Platonic systems of the several gnostics than the Zoroastrian dualism of Mani, since the strife between two principles departs from the descent from silence into word. Beausobre is relating the history of a Persian, not a Greek, Mani, who perishes when a rigorously orthodox magian ruler perceives him as converting the religion of Zoroaster into one of Christ;[57] but the theme of dualism serves to introduce a new way out of the problem of uncreated matter, more ominous and threatening than any the ancient philosophy has so far produced. It was possible to follow the lead

> de ces Philosophes qui ont reconnu dans le Monde deux Etres éternels, l'un actif, l'autre passif: l'Agent, et le Sujet sur lequel il déploye son action: En un mot, Dieu et la Matière. Substances, à la vérité éternelles l'une et l'autre, mais essentiellement différentes, parceque l'une a des proprietez et des perfections que l'autre n'a ni peut avoir; et que tout ce qu'il y a de beauté, d'ornement, d'arrangement, de

[54] Ibid., I, pp. 576–7, 580–1. [55] Ibid., I, pp. 578–9. [56] Ibid., I, p. 581.
[57] Ibid., I, pp. 187, 205; he is also called a Sadducean.

symmetre dans les corps vient de la Sagesse et de la Volonté de l'Esprit, qui a donné le movement à la Matiere, ou du moins qui l'a dirigé.

Mais d'autres se sont imaginez, qu'il n'y a dans l'Univers qu'une seule Substance, qui réunit en elle-même tout ce qu'il y a de Perfections, et qui en vertu du Mouvement qu'elle tient de la même Necessité de qui elle tient son existence, se donne sans cesse à elle – même, et reçoit cette infinite de modifications différentes qui forment les divers Corps dont le Monde est composé.

Je ne crois pas qu'avant les chrétiens il y ait eu d'autre Systême que ces deux-là; Personne n'ayant jamais conçu qu'il fût possible de faire quelque chose de rien.

Celui des Philosophes Persans avoit l'avantage d'être infiniment eloigné du Systême que j'ai propose en second lieu, et qui est connu aujourd'hui sous le nom de SPINOSISME, parceque le fameux SPINOSA l'a remis en vogue, quoiqu'il soit très-ancien. On le trouve effectivement, et dans les Philosophes Grecs et dans les Philosophes Juifs qu'on nomme *Cabbaliste*, desquels on croit que *Spinosa* l'a tiré.[58]

[of those philosophers who have recognised in the world two eternal beings, the one active and the other passive: the agent and the subject of his actions; in a word, God and Matter. Substances indeed both eternal, but essentially different, since the one has properties and perfections which the other has not and cannot have, or since all there is of beauty, adornment, order and symmetry in material bodies comes of the wisdom and will of the Spirit, which has given Matter movement or at least directed it.

But others have imagined that there is in the universe but one single substance, conjoining in itself all there is of perfections, and which, in virtue of the movement which it receives from the necessity to which it owes its existence, turns ever upon itself and receives that infinity of diverse modifications that form the bodies of which the world is composed.

I do not think that before the Christians there was any system other than these two, no one having yet conceived that it was possible to make something out of nothing.

That of the Persian philosophers had the merit of being infinitely remote from the second system I have described, known today by the name of Spinozism because the famous Spinoza has made it once more in fashion, very ancient though it is. It can be found in both Greek philosophers and those Jewish philosophers known as Kabbalists, from whom it is thought Spinoza drew it.][59]

We have encountered the spectre of atheism in its early-Enlightened form. Ralph Cudworth in his *True Intellectual System of the Universe*[60] – published in England in 1678–9 and known to Beausobre from the passages translated into French in the *Bibliothèque choisie* of 1703 – had distinguished two species of atheism: the one mechanistic, reducing the universe to the free fall of atoms through space, and attributed to Democritus in antiquity

[58] Ibid., I, pp. 167–8. [59] Trans. JGAP. [60] Cudworth, 1678, 1995; *Library*, p. 105.

and Hobbes in modernity; the other hylozoistic, reducing it to a single living organism in which matter and spirit could no longer be distinguished, and attributed to a certain Strato in antiquity, and recently revived by moderns he does not name.[61] He may well have meant Spinoza, though his few specific references to that philosopher do not expressly associate him with pantheism.[62] Spinoza was generally interpreted as understanding God and world as a single substance; he had united atheism with pantheism and irreligion with religion, and it is a question for research which of Cudworth's two forms of atheism attracted the larger literature in the eighteenth century.[63] A succession of powerful works in recent scholarship[64] have taught us to think of Spinoza as a radical prophet of modernity; it need not be a refutation of this thesis to point out that for Beausobre and many others he was an archaising philosopher returned from pre-Christian antiquity. Jacques Basnage, whose *Histoire des juifs* Beausobre knew and admired, had observed of Spinoza that he had united the vortices of Descartes with the emanations of the Kabbala,[65] and Beausobre considered cabbalism the Jewish version of the ancient philosophy.[66] (Early modern scholars considered it to belong to the period of the Second Temple.) It was not necessary to invoke modern philosophy to account for Spinoza's impact. It was clear to a number of authors known to Beausobre that ancient philosophy as they understood it was as capable of an atheist monism as it was of dualism, and there were even works *De atheismo Platonis*[67] (though this was energetically disputed). Beausobre quotes the eminent Johann Franz Buddeus as remarking that any ancient who thought emanations from the godhead consubstantial with their source was in grave danger of Spinozism,[68] and he defends Pythagoras against the same charge brought by Basnage.[69]

There was another direction in which the impact of Spinoza extended the understanding of ancient philosophy. Since the early days of the Jesuit mission it had been known that Chinese metaphysics, particularly in their neo-Confucian form, reduced the universe to a single substance – *shih* or *chi*, which might be identified with the Greek *chaos* or the Persian

[61] Cudworth, 1995, I, pp. xl–xli.

[62] Cudworth, 1678, pp. 656 (marg., 'Tract. Theol. Polit.'), 707 ('that late *Theological Politician*, writing against *Miracles*'). See, however, Israel, 2001, p. 284.

[63] For the general question of atheism in the western cultures at this period, see Berman, 1988; Kors, 1990; Hunter and Wootton, 1992.

[64] Popkin, 1979; Israel, 2001, 2006.

[65] Basnage, 1706, p. viii (cf. HMM, II, p. 199).

[66] His sources for this were medieval and modern Jewish (Maimonides and Manasseh ben Israel) and modern Christian (Buddeus, 1702; Basnage, 1706; Wachter, 1706).

[67] See below, p. 161. (Brooke, 2006, is an interesting footnote to this debate.)

[68] HMM, II, p. 151 and n.

[69] Ibid., II, pp. 153–5, 171–3. Pythagoras is definitely Manichaean; ibid., I, pp. 29–33.

zurvan – leaving no room for the idea of a God separate from his creation.[70] Beausobre's Chinese studies tend to the superficial; he does not know much of the Jesuit literature, or Freret's *discours* to the Acadèmie des Inscriptions, published in 1731 as his work neared completion,[71] still less the observations of Bayle and Le Clerc about Spinoza's affinities with Chinese philosophy. He relies on Ramsay's *Voyage de Cyrus* for the almost figurative suggestions that Confucius identified the mythical *kilin* with the Lamb of God and expected the *chun-tzu* as a redemptive hero.[72] He nevertheless insists that the religion of the Chinese elites is a species of materialism,[73] and – dismissing the Singanfu inscription on the mistaken premise that its contents are Manichaean rather than Nestorian[74] – he makes the sound point that *la Chine*, in which Manichaean worship is said to have established itself, probably denotes 'Turkestan', the trans-Caspian and trans-Oxian territories under Han control in the third century.[75] Manichaean dualism did not travel beyond Central Asia to penetrate the Spinozistic heartlands of Confucian China. Beausobre's sources for this are to say the least miscellaneous – a certain Spizelius,[76] the Chevalier Ramsay[77] and to our final astonishment Boulainvilliers,[78] a notorious infidel but here 'un des plus beaux Genies de France'[79] – but this excursion on the wilder shores of heterodoxy and scholarship has enlarged the geography of ancient philosophy.

(iv) the christian heresies and the revolution in philosophy

Beausobre's is a history of Manichaeism, exploring that subject in many chapters we may bypass in pursuit of his contribution to ecclesiastical history ancient and modern. His contribution takes the form of a study of the various gnosticisms that helps explain why the history of the early Church becomes so largely a history of heresies and the formation of an orthodoxy, and we are deep in Beausobre's explanation of this problem as arising from an encounter with ancient philosophy on a Eurasian scale.

[70] BSE, pp. 102–5.
[71] EEG, pp. 161–8. Jesuit authors are cited at HMM, 1, pp. 195 (Le Comte) and 311 (Martini).
[72] HMM, 1, p. 311 (chun-tzu spelt as Kiuntze). [73] Ibid., 1, p. 189.
[74] Ibid., 1, pp. 195 and n. 4, 295.
[75] Ibid., 1, pp. 192–6. See p. 194 for a history of the Mongol empire drawn from Pocock's *Abulpharagius*, in which Temujin the future Genghis Khan appears as a wandering prophet.
[76] Spitzel, 1660. [77] Ramsay, 1727.
[78] HMM, 1, p. 184, cites the *Vie de Mohamed* on Chinese history. Boulainvilliers, 1730–1.
[79] HMM, 1, pp. 20–1.

Within this history, however, it is possible to see that he was pursuing an objective and had a strategy which – if it is in turn possible to employ the word 'liberal' with any stability of meaning – we may term that of liberal Protestantism in the era of and after the *Réfuge*. This strategy had become that of justifying both toleration and tolerance by presenting the heresies as historically explicable and orthodoxy – given faith in its ultimate rightness – as explicable in the same context. Following Petau, Richard Simon and Le Clerc, Beausobre could think of the Apostles and their successors as having received a revelation and struggling to define what it was; there was room for regarding heresies as honest mistakes misrepresented by the orthodox, and orthodoxy itself as coming into being as the Fathers wrestled with problems they shared with the heretics. Here, he indicates, is a way of refuting Bossuet's attack on the *variations des églises protestantes*; it shows how easily, yet how mistakenly, a pagan author could launch the same attack on the primitive Fathers, who were agreed that Jesus was the Son of God but deeply divided on the innumerable ways of saying in what sense he was that.[80] This might well entail a challenge to the Catholic view of the Church as bearer of a gospel whose orthodoxy was divinely guaranteed from the beginning; but even Catholic historians who wrote to vindicate authority and tradition might share a perception of heresy and orthodoxy as taking shape in history. Beausobre explained this history as the result of the Christian gospel's encounter with an ancient philosophy incapable of explaining God fully as a creator, but he saw that philosophy as penetrating deeply into both heresy and orthodoxy. It was a consequence that he placed the history of philosophy very near the centre of the history of Christian belief.

The ancient philosophy – which had travelled a long way from the ancient wisdom perceived by the Renaissance Platonists[81] – was here distributed into a spectrum of beliefs ranging across Eurasia, from Platonism in the west through magian dualism in Iran to a dimly perceived Chinese monism in the furthest east. All these beliefs suffered from an inability to conceive matter as created, and therefore to define God without rendering his presence hard to state in its fullness.[82] Of these philosophies, Platonism was the least remote from Christian belief, as it had been since

[80] Ibid., I, pp. 525–43.

[81] Walker, 1972; Levine, 1992, 1995. Beausobre mentions Marsilio Ficino as one 'qui aimoit Platon à l'adoration'; HMM, II, pp. 177–8.

[82] In chapter 2 of the *Decline and Fall* Gibbon, speaking of the Greek philosophers in general, says 'as it was impossible for them to conceive the creation of matter, the workman in the Stoic philosophy was not sufficiently distinguished from the work' (Womersley, 1994, I, p. 58).

Justin Martyr had described that belief as a journey through Platonism and a struggle to go beyond it, leaving the two systems in an intimate dialectic. Beausobre saw Mani and his followers as trespassing beyond Platonism into Zoroastrian dualism, but lost no opportunity of stressing those elements in Manichaean doctrine which remained compatible with Platonism and therefore with some version of Christian belief. It was necessary to prevent the Platonic doctrine of the Demiurgus as a lesser creator from giving rise to a Zoroastrian doctrine of an opposed creator or manipulator of matter; if that could be prevented, the Demiurgus might be a Johannine Logos in some way present if not incarnate in Christ. Mani had been, in the last analysis, a confused thinker and even an impostor, but there might be ways of reclaiming his doctrine for Christianity. As for the gnostics who could be considered his predecessors, these had for the most part avoided falling into the trap of dualism, and when they had entered it, they had done so to avoid making God the author of evil. Beausobre loses no opportunity of describing any one of them – back to the pseudo-Clementine Simon himself – as a Platonist philosopher,[83] not altogether removed from the Christianity he cannot formulate even if he wishes (as Simon, unlike Basilides, does not).

The study of heresy, then – extending through the gnostics to the Manichaeans, if not to the altogether unacceptable 'Spinozism' lying beyond them – is conducted by Beausobre as an enterprise ultimately eirenic, in which the heretics are shown struggling unsuccessfully with a problem – that of defining God as fully a creator – which only the Christians will succeed (and they with difficulty) in overcoming. It has been Beausobre's premise from the outset that no philosopher before the Christians was able to conceive of matter created *ex nihilo*, without which God must rely on some agency less than his own; but at the stage we have reached in exploring his system, he has not yet told us when, how or even why the Christian philosophers acquired this revolutionary capacity. At this stage, indeed, it is part of his eirenic strategy to delay such an explanation. To do so leaves the early Fathers – Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, even Origen – struggling with the limitations of the ancient philosophy and not always able to overcome them. The orthodox can be shown sharing a history with the heretics, but usually unwilling to admit that they do so. They therefore resort to denouncing heresy as diabolically inspired, and there is room for Beausobre, like Le Clerc before him, to criticise the *histoires scandaleuses*

[83] HMM, I, pp. xviii (Basilides), 35, 36–7 (Simon), 40 (Basilides Manichaean), 379 (Docetes), 479 (Manichaeans Platonists), 494 (Philo), 559–60 (Manichaean and Platonic Trinity), 581–4 (Valentinians), II, pp. 11–13 (neo-Platonist refutation of gnostics), 21–2 (Basilides's 'confusion Platonicienne').

in which such as Epiphanius had depicted gnostics and Manichaeans as engaged in nameless orgies. This of course was a secondary target; the real aim, for liberal and sceptical critics alike, was to depict orthodox and heretics as engaged in a common history. It was an aim not incompatible with Christian faith, yet always open to the charges of Socinianism and the like, though perhaps never fairly of Spinozism.

Dispersed among Beausobre's many chapters on the doctrines and practices of the Manichaeans, there are digressions – he calls them 'episodes' – that tell us much about his purposes and concerns. The most relevant of them to the study of his overall strategy is perhaps the last, which comes near to being an *envoi* to his book as a whole. Here he identifies a 'Politique Ecclésiastique' and an 'Esprit de l'Eglise',[84] perhaps a phrase derived from Arnold, from which he prays to be delivered: a spirit of unreasoning hatred and systematic slander against all heresies, that has led to misrepresentation of their doctrines and calumny against their practices – he is following Le Clerc and anticipating Gibbon – and does much to substantiate the Catholic case against the *variations des églises prétendues réformées*. Beausobre is looking back to the affirmation at the outset of his history[85] that if he is sometimes the apologist of the heresies, it is because there is need to understand them. To see what they were and how they arose is not only to free ourselves of a load of fantasy and slander; it is to understand orthodoxy better, by showing how it was formulated and why it was hard to define and maintain. Not all accepted doctrines will survive this historisation – Beausobre is after all a Protestant – and the authors of slander will usually have been orthodox themselves: not only lesser figures like Epiphanius or slightly mad like Tertullian, but figures otherwise admirable but misled by zeal, like Irenaeus, or in other chapters Augustine himself. In a passage we must imagine Gibbon reading with enjoyment, he quotes the greatest of the Latin Fathers thanking God for introducing him to the writings of Plato in time to deliver him from the errors of Manichaeism. Augustine did well to thank God, muses Beausobre, since Platonic philosophy might have been expected to plunge him deeper into heresy (this is perhaps a half-truth, given the *Histoire*'s insistence that Plato never fell into the belief in two warring principles); Augustine had converted the poison into its antidote.[86] The encounter with ancient philosophy remains the key to the history of the Christian intellect.

[84] Ibid., II, pp. 729–30. The *Histoire* has for some time become an invective against the paganism of glorifying the martyrs as miracle-working saints (Book IX, chapters III–V).
[85] Ibid., I, p. xxi. [86] Ibid., I, pp. 479–80.

There is another digression, taking up nearly all the second book of the *Histoire*,[87] dealing with false and apocryphal gospels, ascribed to apostles and others, telling tales of the life and teachings of Christ which the Church as it took shape had declined to accept. It had been known to ancients and moderns alike that there had been a great many of these, long before the texts of some of them came to light in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and nothing is more misleading than the contemporary habit of writing as if these discoveries have disrupted the idea of a single canon of gospels, accepted since the beginning. Like all scholars of his time, Beausobre knew that the Fathers had faced the problem of deciding between the false gospels and the true; that he vigorously endorses their choice does not mean that he did not know that it had to be made, and he remarks that it was the more difficult since the Church was not a state like ancient Israel, with authorities commissioned to determine orthodoxy, but a loose alliance of congregations.[88] The history of canonical and apocryphal gospels is part of the history of how orthodoxy faced the problem of determining itself. Of the apocrypha some are Manichaean, many gnostic, many merely fabulous and superstitious; a significant few take us back to the very beginnings of heresy, among Judaising Christians before the later gnostics began condemning the creation as achieved by the false god of the Jews. Among the first Jewish converts, some who came to be known as Ebionites held that Jesus had not been other than a man born of Joseph and Mary; others thought him born of a virgin and the Spirit, but could not believe that his body had been other than an appearance of the flesh. These were the Docetes, sometimes known as Nazarenes, and there was room in their belief for an originating point of the gnostic belief that Christ was a spirit who had descended upon the body of Jesus; if this was a Jewish-Christian belief, however, it was not the sole source of the gnostic representation of creation as the error of a lesser divinity. Beausobre makes much of it, however, at certain points in his work,[89] which perhaps Gibbon was to follow,[90] in the attempt to give heresy, if not gnosticism, a Jewish origin as well as a Gentile.[91] Whether Ebionites or Docetes were

[87] Book II is headed (Ibid., I, p. 337) 'Des Apocryphes, qu'on dit avoir été supposez, ou falsifiez par les Manichéens', and concludes (pp. 438–64) with a 'Discours où l'on fait voir que les Livres Apocryphes, et Fabuleux, bien loin de donner atteinte à la certitude des Faits miraculeux, contenus dans les Evangiles, et par conséquent à la certitude de la Religion Chrétienne, concourent à les confirmer.'

[88] Ibid., I, p. 450; cf. pp. 288–9. [89] Ibid., I, pp. 459–60, II, pp. 517–20. [90] Below, p. 253.

[91] He goes so far (ibid., II, p. 570) as to give gnosticism a cabbalistic origin and say 'La plûpart de ceux que l'on nomme Gnostiques sortoient du Judaïsme.' It is hard to reconcile this with the gnostic view of the Creator as a fallen Jehovah.

victims of the ancient philosophy, surviving among Jews as well as Greeks and Persians, is a further question.

We now approach the crucial moment in Beausobre's history of the Christian intellect, the adoption of a doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, making possible a Christian theology and dispute within it. This step changed the nature of both orthodoxy and heresy. The gnostic and Manichaean 'heresies' could be regarded – though Beausobre thought they should not – as outside the Christian mainstream altogether, professing a doctrine of God that lessened the divinity of both Father and Son; the Arian heresy – towards which all histories of the early Church looked as furnishing a defining moment – presented both persons as sharing an absolute divinity and asked only how they shared in it. Bishop Bull's insistence that Arians had gnostic forebears[92] was not implausible but overstated. Beausobre was obliged by the structure of his argument to show how and where the adoption of *ex nihilo* creation occurred, changing the character of Christian debate and making a revolutionary break with the entire past history of Gentile – and in so far as there had been such a thing Jewish – philosophy. The structure of his rhetoric, however, worked against the structure of his argument and caused him to send mixed signals. He was so far intent on showing orthodoxy and heresy as sharing a common history that, having proclaimed the adoption of *ex nihilo* creation a revolutionary moment, he then merged it with his narrative to a point where it became difficult to tell when it had occurred.

It was not a revealed or a scriptural truth. Genesis i, 1 indeed proclaimed that 'in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth', but the text went on to declare that before God spoke the creative word 'the earth was without form and void', which could be read as indicating a chaos of uncreated matter to which God gave form but not being, 'creating' the categories into which he now organised it. One could, though one need not, suppose that a 'principle' or organising agency emanated from God, and perhaps another from matter, in which case 'in the beginning' would mean *in principio*, rather than indicating a moment at which non-being was replaced by being.[93] It was not clear, then, that Genesis proclaimed a creation *ex nihilo*, and Beausobre observed that if Moses had intended to announce so new and unheard-of a doctrine, he could have chosen less ambiguous language in which to do so.[94] This was to marginalise revelation. The ancient Hebrews had lived in a world governed by the

[92] Above, pp. 113, 121. [93] HMM, II, p. 291.
[94] Ibid., II, p. 208. See more generally, pp. 218–19, 224, 228–9.

language of the ancient philosophy, and had made use of it in formulating the truth revealed to them. If their posterity had come to perceive that the world had been created out of nothing, this was a truth arrived at as language changed, under various pressures of which an original revelation had certainly been one.

This step had been taken by Christians, not by their Jewish predecessors, and had been taken as the history of the gospel came to be increasingly a history of philosophy. Beausobre treats John i, 1 as no more a revelation of new doctrine than Genesis i, 1 had been. That the Apostle was inspired in writing it need not be doubted but was not the issue. He was faced by a variety of misstatements, many originating in the ancient philosophy, and had chosen the language best fitted to avoid them.[95] As gnostic and quasi-gnostic thought moved down the scale of divinity, from the godhead of silent perfection to the lesser godhead of creation, the terms Logos, Verbum and Word were increasingly used to denote the latter; Platonic theology was part of this progress; but the Fourth Gospel spoke of the Word by which all things had been made in order to indicate its full participation in both godhead and creation. In the beginning was the Word; the Word was in the beginning; the Word was the beginning. Creation was becoming central to the concept of God, but it was the philosophers rather than the congregations who needed to be persuaded of it.

Beausobre enquired which of the Christian authors – Fathers? philosophers? – it had been who first explicitly declared that the world had been created out of nothing. He found a case for the work known as the *Shepherd Hermas*; Justin Martyr had been ambiguous, as one would expect of a Platonist; and perhaps the first unequivocal formulation had been put forward by Irenaeus.[96] Here one might expect Beausobre to give even greater weight than he does to the passage beginning 'John the disciple of the Lord',[97] where Irenaeus sets the Apostle in direct opposition to those who deny the world to be the work of God, and seems to make it clear that the Father must be Creator so that his absolute divinity can be shared by the Son, and that the Son must be equal in that divinity so that he can act as Redeemer. Irenaeus seems to say, as the orthodox certainly did after him, that it was the need for a direct relation between Creation and Redemption that drove the Christians to repudiate the ancient philosophy, as Beausobre presents it, and make the primary Godhead the creator of the universe.

Beausobre does not doubt this linkage, though he has a predictably Arminian if not Socinian tendency to make Christ less the atonement for

[95] Ibid., i, pp. 377, 571–2, ii, p. 518 and n. 3. [96] Ibid., ii, pp. 230–1. [97] Above, p. 31.

men's sins than the teacher of those virtues that may fit them for eternal life.[98] What he aims to do is to make the Christian view of creation take shape within the history of philosophy, rather than of a revealed doctrine of God, and to emphasise the extent to which the ancient philosophy retained its hold on the Christian intellect, and was perhaps never entirely eliminated from it. Even Origen, even Fathers more orthodox than he, and of course even Augustine in the fifth century, had had real difficulty in detaching God from matter and making him its creator, and there was the persistent ambiguity that left it uncertain whether creation, even *ex nihilo*, meant the conferring of existence or only of form. Plato, chief of the ancient philosophers, could never be eliminated. Beausobre is led to construct a chapter asking whether any of the arguments for creation *ex nihilo* would convince, or rather convert, an intelligence previously persuaded of the contrary, and concludes that ambivalence and uncertainty would assuredly persist.[99] This is in accord with his tolerationist purposes, to pursue which may have been his reason for entering upon the entire debate. He asks the question

Si l'Erreur de l'étérnité de la Matiére peut être regardée comme une Erreur mortelle,[100]

[whether the eternity of matter is to be regarded as a mortal error]

and proceeds:

A l'égard de la Question, si Dieu a fait le Monde de rien, ou s'il y a employé une Matiere qui existoit éternellement, je la regarde plutôt, comme une Question Philosophique, que comme une Question de Religion, La Création de rien est conforme à la droite Raison; Elle fait honneur à Dieu; Elle éleve sa Puissance à une hauteur infinite; Elle arrache jusqu'à la racine de l'Athéisme. Nul Etre ne partage avec Dieu l'Existence par soi-même: Nul autre Principe de toutes choses que lui. Cependant je regarde celle Vérité comme une Verité philosophique, plutôt comme une Vérité de la Religion; et je me fonde sur ce que j'ai dit après de grands Hommes; c'est qui Moïse ne s'est pas expliqué clairement là-dessus.[101]

[With regard to the question whether God made the world of nothing or made use of a matter existing from eternity, I think it rather a question of philosophy than of religion. Creation *ex nihilo* is in accord with right reason; it does honour to God; it elevates his power to an infinite height; it tears up atheism by the root. No

[98] HMM, I, pp. 276, 476: 's'unir à la Nature Humaine et lui communiquer toutes les Perfections qu'une Nature créée est capable de recevoir'.

[99] Ibid., II, p. 204.

[100] Ibid., II, p. 239 (in marg.). Trans. JGAP, as are all translations in this chapter not otherwise attributed.

[101] Ibid., II, p. 240.

being shares with God the existence he has of himself; there is no other principle of all things but him. None the less I regard this truth as one of philosophy rather than of religion, and I base myself on that which I have already said following many great men: namely, that Moses was not fully explicit about it in the passage studied above.]

He goes on to quote Cudworth[102] to the effect that men who believe in uncreated matter may be men of piety and virtue, to distinguish them from the atheists who acknowledge only a single principle, and to say that Plato has been adequately defended from the charge of atheism, brought by the learned Gundling of Halle, in the work *De atheismo Platonis* by the learned Zimmerman of Zurich.

Je conclurrai donc avec ce savant Moderne, que l'Eternité de la Matiére est une Erreur, et meme une Erreur grossiére; mais j'ajouterai avec lui que separée des consequences que nos Philosophes en tirent, et que le Hérétiques en ont tirées et adoptées, elle ne détruit point la Religion.[103]

[I conclude then, with this learned modern, that the eternity of matter is an error, even a gross error; but I add with him that, if separated from the consequences drawn from it by philosophers and adopted by heretics, it is in no way destructive of religion.]

We are in a world of moderns, but it may be wondered what has become of the revolution wrought by Christians against the whole weight of ancient philosophy, when it seems that the error has persisted and may be tolerated. In particular, how did Beausobre propose to deal with the conclusion, universally drawn in antiquity, that if matter was eternal, God could not be a creator or intervene decisively in the universe? The solution he proposes[104] is drawn in some measure from Irenaeus and owes something to Augustine, but the authority he finally quotes is a modern and an Englishman: Nehemiah Grew, a pioneer botanist and student of the sexuality of plants, who had published a *Cosmologia Sacra* investigating ancient and Christian theories of the origin of life.[105] From these sources Beausobre arrives at the doctrine of a God eternally active and creative, so that the creation of matter may have gone on from all eternity. We break finally with the previously persistent error of holding matter eternal on the grounds that it is uncreated and independent of God. It is clear, however, that Christian thought arrived at this breakthrough by no revelation or sudden philosophical illumination, but by slow and piecemeal reflection

[102] Ibid., II, pp. 242–3.
[103] Ibid., II, pp. 244–5, references in a footnote.
[104] Ibid., II, pp. 274–5.
[105] Grew, 1701.

in the course of its own history. It is historiography, in this sense, that Beausobre brings to the study of theology.

Creation *ex nihilo* and *ab aeterno* closes the gap in the history of philosophical theology, though it leaves open problems in the chronology of the earth. Archbishop Ussher's dating of the Creation is not after all a necessary doctrine, but Beausobre cannot quite approve Thomas Burnet's contention[106] that the Mosaic account of the Creation (and the Fall) is a philosophic fable. As for Newton, he is never mentioned and need not have been an actor in this narrative. What cannot be doubted is that Beausobre's Enlightenment – if his resolute support of toleration makes him part of one – is Platonist, as is his history of heresy and orthodoxy. The 'new philosophy' makes little appearance in his volumes – other than the remark that Augustine's suggestion that creation fills only part of infinite space cannot be reconciled with the modern Epicureans who deny a vacuum;[107] Cudworth must be the source for this and his Epicurus is Hobbes. There is no need, as we read Beausobre, to suppose that Hobbes, Descartes and Locke have made a decisive breach with Plato and dismissed ancient philosophy for ever. Beausobre's systematic reduction, whenever he sees an opening, of Manichaeism and gnosticism to Platonism and a modified Pythagoreanism ends with creation *ab aeterno* – a means of preserving and vindicating a God eternally active through the Word. We may be in the presence of a new kind of orientalism: in the west a God communicative and creative with the Logos at the heart of his being; as we move east different aspects of the God of Bythos and Sigē, depth and silence, above creation and beyond being as we can conceive it. It is a strange thought that the homeland of ancient philosophy is to be overrun by Islam, the most unequivocal of monotheisms. Meanwhile there is no doubt that Beausobre's appeal to Gibbon lay in the richness and relativity of his historiography, though it remains to be seen what use Gibbon made of it.

[106] Burnet is quoted repeatedly throughout the *Histoire*; less for his *Sacred History of the Earth* (admired by Gibbon) than for his *Archaeologia Philosophiae*, a study of ancient views of the history of things. Burnet, 1690, 1692, 1728.

[107] HMM, II, p. 277. Cudworth and Beausobre might – though in the latter case evidence is hard to find – have had Gassendi in mind, and Epicurus's suggestion that the fall of atoms through space might allow the chance creation of an infinity of worlds. Since the Epicurean gods were uninterested in human affairs, they might be conflated into the uncaring *bythos* of the gnostics. For recent studies of the revival of Epicurus in the growth of 'modern' philosophy, see Osler, 1993, and Robertson, 2005.

CHAPTER 6

Johann Lorenz von Mosheim: modern ecclesiastical historian

(1) THE STRUCTURES OF A CHURCH HISTORY

Of the three Protestant masters named by Gibbon, the last is the most completely a historian as the term was understood then, or may be now. Le Clerc's *Historia Ecclesiastica* is incomplete and stops short of Gibbon's concerns; Beausobre's *Histoire critique* is a history in the sense of an enquiry, not a narrative. Mosheim in the two last of his works achieved a history of the Christian Church on the same scale as Fleury's, from Christ to the present; and while not equal to Tillemont for detail and erudition, he did not share Fleury's need to affirm the unbroken chain of authority as well as veracity. As a Protestant, he saw the Church's history as largely that of a usurpation, and this necessarily increased his willingness to give central place to contingency and circumstance. Some Protestants still insisted that papal ascendancy had been the work of Antichrist,[1] but Mosheim was able to present it as the outcome of unintended consequences and circumstantial changes, such as might, indeed must, occur in the history of any human association. The balance between spiritual and secular causes, which Gibbon was to be seen as having radically disturbed, was already wavering in Mosheim's narrative, but did not in the least challenge his or his readers' Christian orthodoxy. It seems, however, that he may have been better known among his English readers than in his own country. The history of Enlightenment – defined as the ascendancy of critical method over faith in the text – in Protestant Germany is at present written largely in terms of the impact of Christian Thomasius, a fierce critic of the role of philosophy in shaping theology and a leader in the reformation of natural law. Mosheim seems to have been little involved, for or against, in this tumultuous movement, and his role in twentieth-century German

[1] For the importance to the history of Enlightenment of Laudian departures from this position, see Trevor-Roper, 1968, 1987.

historiography is less than dominant.[2] In England it may be another matter. He knew English and had English correspondents; there are energetic responses to him in the writings of William Warburton and Nathaniel Lardner;[3] and Archibald Maclaine's translation of his history had a long shelf life before it in both England and America. Gibbon possessed his works in both Latin and (where available) English, and it has been suggested that his role in the formation of the *Decline and Fall* is his chief legacy to posterity.[4] It is with that role that this chapter will be concerned.

Johann Lorenz von Mosheim – the 'von' signalises his birth in 1693 of a family of minor nobility in northern Germany[5] – was ordained as a Lutheran pastor and made his career in academic scholarship, first at Helmstedt and later at the new university of Göttingen, where he became chancellor. He published both minor and major works of theology and ecclesiastical history; those of the former relevant to the latter include an early work, *De turbata per recentiores Platonicos ecclesia* – a theme greatly developed in his later histories – a Latin translation of Ralph Cudworth's *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* – which he often regretted undertaking for reasons like those which had led Le Clerc to regret his attempt to translate Henry Hammond[6] – and, intended for the less learned, *Versuch einer unparteiischen und grundlich Ketzergeschichte*: a response as its title shows to Gottfried Arnold's work on the same subject.[7] His major histories, of which Gibbon made use, are *De Rebus Christianorum ante Constantinum Magnum Commentarii* (Helmstedt, 1753) and *Institutionum historiae ecclesiasticae antiqui et recentioris libri quattuor . . .* , published at Helmstedt in the year of his death, 1755. Gibbon owned copies of both, and of the English translation of the *Institutiones* published in 1765.[8]

[2] Thanks to Mack Walker for advice on this point. For recent work in English on Thomasius see Hunter 2001, 2007; Ahnert 2006; and Hunter, Ahnert and Grunert, 2007. For modern studies of Mosheim in his clerical setting see Stroup, 1984, 1986; Bödecker, 1986; Mosheim, 1988–9; Mulsow et al., 1997.

[3] Warburton, 1837, I, pp. 532–55; Maclaine, 1826, I, pp. 152–3.

[4] Mulsow et al., 1997, p. 84.

[5] There is a short life of Mosheim prefixed to the translation of the *Institutiones* (Maclaine, 1826, pp. viii–ix).

[6] Mosheim's translation of Cudworth was published at Jena in 1733. There is an English translation of his Latin notes, taking issue with the original on many points, in Cudworth, 1995. The Latin translation was republished at Leiden in 1773, with several lesser works by Cudworth, Le Clerc and Mosheim (Mosheim, 1773). His preface recounts the attempts of other scholars to turn Cudworth into Latin, and explains that his English is 'a Romani sermonis norma abhorren[s]' and written in times when 'lingua Anglorum multo plus sordium et difficultatum habebat, quam habet hodie' (p. xvi). Cudworth, he says, fell into errors due 'partim philosophiae, quam unice amabat, Platonicae studio' (p. xx). For Le Clerc's difficulties with Hammond, see above, pp. 118–19. They are mentioned in Mosheim, 1773, pp. xi, xxxiii.

[7] Arnold, 1699–1700; Laursen, 2005.

[8] *Library*, p. 202.

As its title tells us, the *De Rebus* is the closer in scope and subject to Gibbon's concerns in chapters 15 and 16, and to those of this volume. Gibbon, who used both works, remarks[9] that the *De Rebus* is more detailed and fuller in its coverage than the faster-moving *Institutiones*, originally a manual for use by instructors of young students but enlarged in Mosheim's last years to meet the needs of the general (but Latin-using) reader.[10]

Historia Ecclesiastica novi foederis perspicua est et sincera narratio rerum illarum, quae vel societati illi hominum, cui nomen a CHRISTO est, extrinsecus acciderunt, vel intra ipsos eius fines gestae sunt, in qua sic eventa cum caussis suis copulantur, ut et Dei providentiam in ea constituenda et conservanda cognoscant homines, et pietate non minus, quam sapientia, crescant.

Vix ea melius exponi poterit et perfectius, quam si coetum hunc hominum, quem diximus, tamquam civitatem quamdam consideremus, quae sub legitimo imperio certis legibus et institutis regitur. Eiusmodi civitati multa primum extrinsecus eveniant, necesse est, quae saluti eius vel prosunt, vel obsunt; Deinde, ut nihil humanum stabile est, in ipso eius sinu multa contingant oportet, quae statum eius mutant. Hinc Historia eius in *externam et interiorem* commodissime distribuitur. Eodem modo civitatis Christianae Historia, si nihil omittendum sit, unde fructus quidam sperari potest, dividi debet.[11]

[The ecclesiastical history of the New Dispensation is a clear and faithful narrative of those things which have either befallen from without that society of men that takes its name from Christ, or have been generated within its borders; one in which events are so connected with their causes that men perceive God's providence in instituting and preserving it, and so increase in piety as well as in knowledge.

This can hardly be better or more perfectly explained than by considering this body of men which we have mentioned as a particular state, governed under lawful authority by certain laws and institutions. To such a society many things must needs happen from without, which either promote or obstruct its well-being; and so, since nothing human is fixed or stable, many things must happen from within which change its condition. As a result, its history is best divided into *external* and *internal*. In the same way should the history of the Christian commonwealth be divided, so that nothing is omitted from which we may hope to learn something.][12]

[9] DF, I, ch. 15, n. 18; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 453, III, p. 1243.

[10] *Institutiones*, sig. b3, 'Praefatio'. [11] Ibid., sig. a2, 'Praeparatio'.

[12] Trans. JGAP. The 1765 English translation is by Archibald Maclaine (1722–1804); an Irish-born Presbyterian who had studied at Glasgow with William Leechman and Francis Hutcheson and became minister at the 'English' (but Presbyterian) Church at The Hague (ODNB, *sub nomine*). Thanks to James Moore for help in clarifying these facts. Maclaine's translation is free and he often expands Mosheim's fairly terse Latin with the intention of clarifying, expanding or (occasionally) improving it. I have preferred to give my own, while using Maclaine's where it shows how Mosheim might be interpreted by an eighteenth-century Anglo-British reader. All passages from his text are taken from the edition of 1826. Translations by JGAP are enclosed within square brackets; quotations from Maclaine are not. I cite 'Maclaine, 1826' for purposes of comparison.

For the Catholic Fleury, the history of the Church displayed – indeed, consisted in – the uninterrupted succession to papal and episcopal authority, the uninterrupted maintenance of orthodoxy, the uninterrupted presence of Christ in the Church's institutions. Mosheim was a Lutheran, for whom salvific truth was in the Scriptures, and the Church was a body of men and women committed by their faith to finding, declaring and obeying the truths to be found there. Since truth was in the Scriptures and not in the Church, there was no obstacle to presenting the Church as a human association located in history, exposed to the contingencies and displaying the characteristics common to other human associations whose histories could be narrated. Its history might be accidental and circumstantial, and might include the actions of rulers and peoples not belonging to it. This was what Mosheim meant by its 'external' history; the history denominated 'internal' was produced by the actions of its members and was a more complex story (as the historians of political societies had known from the beginning). Here Mosheim established a further distinction, used in organising his narrative throughout the centuries recorded in the *Institutiones* of 1755.

Omnes vero populi nunc prosperis, nunc vicissim adversis satis utuntur, nec alia Christianorum fortuna fuit. Quamobrem haec pars Historiae sanctioris apte in narrationem *fatorum prosperorum et adversorum*, quae Christiani senserunt, distribuitur.[13]

[All peoples experience prosperity and adversity by turns, nor has the fortune of the Christians been otherwise. For that reason this branch of sacred history may conveniently be divided into the prosperous and adverse events Christians have undergone.][14]

Though this section occurs under the heading of 'external' history, it is evident that prosperity and adversity may arise from within as well as without.

Prospera ac secunda fata, quibus res Christiana aucta et amplificata est, vel a ducibus et praefectis eius, vel ab ipso populo profecta sunt. Duces populi Christiani in *publicos* et *privatos* partire licet. Illi sunt Reges, magistratus, Pontifices. Hi doctores, viri docti, graves et copiosi. Utrique omni tempore plurimum ad incrementa civitatis contulerunt. Viri principes auctoritate sua, legibus, beneficiis, immo armis, rem publicam cum firmarunt, tum propagarunt. Doctores, hominesque doctrinae, ingenii, sanctimoniae et virtutis laude inclyti, rebus fortiter ac praeclare gestis,

[13] *Institutiones* ('Praeparatio', III, p. 3).

[14] Maclaine, 1826, I, p. 2, translates 'populi' by 'public societies' and 'Historiae sanctioris' by 'ecclesiastical history'. 'Events' is his regular translation of 'fata' and is adopted here.

itineribus, libris et opibus suis religionem a CHRISTO traditam aliis eius ignaris mirifico successu commendarunt. Ipse populus christianus fide, constantia, pietate et amore erga Deum et homines multos adduxit, ut CHRISTO sese subiicerent.

Adversa pariter, in quae Christiani inciderunt, fata vel vitio ipsorum religionis Christianae professorum, vel odio et insidiis hostium eius acciderunt. Christianos ipsos, maxime praefectos gregis, negligentia, pravis studiis, rixis et contentionibus, multa populo concitasse mala, testatissimum est. Hostes regni CHRISTI vel *publici* sunt iterum, vel *privati. Publici*, Reges nimirum et magistratibus, legibus et poenis cursum rei Christianae cohibuerunt. *Privati*, philosophos intelligo, homines superstitionibus infectos, Dei, omnisque religionis contemtores, criminationibus, dolis et libris eam adorti sunt.[15]

[The fortunate and favourable events by which the Christian community has been increased and multiplied have proceeded either from its leaders and officers, or from the community itself. The leaders of this community may be divided into public and private. The former are kings, magistrates and pontiffs; the latter its teachers, learned, grave and eloquent men. Both have in all ages contributed greatly to the increase of the commonwealth. The rulers, by their authority, their laws, their beneficent actions,[16] and even their arms, have strengthened the commonwealth as they have extended it. The teachers, men of learning, genius, holiness and virtue, worthy of all praise, have by their courageous and memorable actions, their journeys, writings and counsels, forming a wonderful succession, made the religion received from Christ known to those otherwise ignorant of it. The Christian people themselves, by their faith, constancy, piety and love towards God and men, have brought many to submit themselves to Christ.

The adverse fortunes which have befallen the Christians have likewise arisen either from the vices of the professors of religion themselves or from the hatred and intrigues of its enemies. It is amply testified how Christians, especially the leaders of the flock, by their negligence, evil counsels, quarrels and contentions, have stirred up great evils among the people. The enemies of Christ's kingdom are, once again, either public or private. Among the public, kings and magistrates in particular have impeded the progress of Christianity with their laws and punishments. Among the private enemies, I have in mind those philosophers, men infected with superstitions, enemies of God and all religion, who have opposed it by their accusations, deceptions and writings.]

In this passage Mosheim has used no fewer than four Latin terms – *populus, civitas, res publica* and *res* alone – which ordinarily indicate the civil community, to indicate that the history of the Christian Church may be written as that of a human association with the same fortunes and the same faults. Its misfortunes are often of its own making, and its leaders include both civil and clerical magistrates. By *fata*, the word rendered by both the contemporary and the modern translator as 'events', may be

[15] *Institutiones*, pp. 3–4. [16] Maclaine, 1826, I, p. 2: 'liberality'.

understood less actions than their outcomes: 'fatum id appello', Cicero had written, 'quod Graeci εἱμαρμένην, id est ordinem seriemque causarum'.[17] It was through the laws of cause and effect, so often mysterious and astonishing, that God's providence was to be seen as acting, and the concept or image of Providence was to prove important to both Mosheim and to Gibbon's fifteenth chapter. And it is central to all Christian historiography that the 'private' enemies of the Church are here said to have been philosophers, though it is not clear whether Mosheim intends ancient pagans or godless moderns. These are the Church's enemies, operating from without; but others, acting within it, are the authors of change.

Ad *interioris* autem *Historiae* mysteria recludenda, cognitione *Historiae doctrinarum et litterarum*, in primis *philosophicae*, nihil est conducibilius. Nescio enim, quonam malo fato factum est, ut humanae doctrinae et philosophicae plus semper tributum sit potestatis in sapientiam divinitus traditam, atque ratio et natura utriusque diversa patitur. Neque nihil ad hanc rem accurata inspectio status rei publicae et antiquae superstitionis prodest. Multas enim et disciplinae et cultus Christiani partes antistitum prudentia dicam an imprudentia? ad normam veterum religionum inflexit: nec parum voluntati summorum imperantium, humanisque legibus in componenda sacra civitate datum fuit.[18]

[To understand the mysteries of the Church's internal history, nothing is more valuable than knowledge of the history of learning and letters, in particular the philosophical. For I know not by what ill fate it has happened that more weight has constantly been allowed to human learning and philosophy in the transmission of the divine wisdom, and the reason and nature of both has suffered diverse fortunes.[19] This enquiry is greatly aided by a careful study of the ancient government and its superstitions, since the wisdom – or unwisdom? – of our ministers has shaped many features of Christian discipline and worship in conformity with the old religions, and much was yielded to the will of the emperors and to human legislation.]

Mosheim's history of the Church is, in a sense, almost Tacitean, a civil history. The Christian community is a body politic or *res publica*, shaped over time by its own actions and by external contingency; not all the actions taken by its members are inspired or turn out as expected or

[17] Cicero, *De Divinatione*, I, 125, quoted in Lewis, 1901, p. 394, *sub 'fatum'*. [18] *Institutiones*, p. 6.

[19] Cf. Maclaine, 1826, I, p. 8: 'With respect to the *Internal History of the Church*, nothing is more adapted to lay open to view the hidden springs of its various changes, than an acquaintance with the *History of Learning and Philosophy* in ancient times. For it is certain, that human learning and philosophy have, in all times, pretended to modify the doctrines of Christianity; and that these pretensions have extended farther than belongs to the province of philosophy on the one hand, or is consistent with the purity and simplicity of the Gospel on the other.' Maclaine's translation contains more invocations of the original simplicity of Christ's message than occur in Mosheim's text.

intended; it yields much to the political and cultural forces it encounters in the world, and among these a number of roles are played by philosophy, acting both upon and within it. There is a key narrative, that of the shaping of authority within it; and in this will appear both the unintended consequences of changed behaviour and the human propensity to maximise one's power.

Primum igitur in *Historia interiori* locum occupat *Historia praefectorum ecclesiae* et ipsius gubernationis. Principio doctores una cum populo rem Christianam moderabantur. Verum hi doctores altiores sibi, tempore procedente, spiritus sumebant, iuribusque populi conculcatis, summam sibi potestatem in res et sacras et profanas arrogarunt. Postremum eo sensim res evadebat, ut unus summam rerum administraret, saltem administrare vellet.[20]

[The first place in the Church's internal history is held by that of its officers and government (trans. JGAP; Maclaine's translation from here.) When we look back to the commencement of the Christian Church, we find its government administered jointly by the pastors and the people. But, in process of time, the scene changes, and we see these pastors affecting an air of pre-eminence and superiority, trampling upon the rights and privileges of the community, and assuming to themselves a supreme authority, both in civil and religious matters. This invasion of the rights of the people was at length carried to such a height, that a single man administered, or at least claimed a right to administer, the affairs of the whole Church with an unlimited sway.][21]

Maclaine's translation leaves much to be desired, yet is worth considering. We have yet to see how Mosheim develops – and Gibbon develops even further – this almost Polybian account of the transition from a democracy of worshippers to an aristocracy of bishops, and then to the monarchy of the pope. Republican theory was not uncommonly pagan or deist in its ecclesiastical politics,[22] but here we have it deployed by a Protestant and Lutheran historian, in no way averse to authority either ecclesiastical or royal. The papal usurpation remained the target, for Protestants and *philosophes* alike.

The history of the Church is tangled and difficult, for the reason that, as a history, it does not differ in content or problems from the history of any civil society. It has been recorded and narrated by humans, with no more than a human capacity to preserve and interpret evidence, so that its records are scanty and debatable; the Scriptures may be infallible, but the *historiae ecclesiasticae* are not. It relates the actions of humans exposed to human weaknesses and historic circumstance and contingency; and exactly

[20] *Institutiones*, p. 4. The word *ecclesia* has appeared.
[21] Maclaine, 1826, I, pp. 3–4.
[22] Goldie, 1987, 1993; Champion, 1992, 2003.

the same is true of those who have attempted to write it in the past and are continuing the attempt in the present. They are, Mosheim says, in danger of three kinds of servitude (*servitus*, translated by Maclaine as 'bias'):[23] those posed by the times in which they live, by the authors on whom they rely, and by the convictions (*opiniones*) they hold; and he explains in detail how all these dangers may operate. The same, and many other forces peculiar to the secular world, operated on the actors whose deeds and their consequences, usually unexpected, the historians narrate; and nothing in the Christian gospel has operated to make the world in which it operates other than the world is – whether or not as a consequence of the Fall, Mosheim does not appear to consider. All this goes to make the history of the Church a history as that term is understood; but there is a further dimension.

His, aliisque vitiis, quae praetermittemus, si careant illi, qui Historiae sanctioris operam navant, magnam ea non potest non humano generi, illis praesertim, quibus rei sacrae procuratio commissa est, utilitatem afferre. Qui cum cura tot, tamque varios et acerbos casus expendet, quos religio Christiana feliciter superavit, is animo haud dubie sese confirmatum et adversus profanorum hominum minas, cavillationes et insidias praeclare munitum sentiet. Tot illustra exempla, quibus haec Historia reserta est, ad pietatem accendendam et amorem Dei torpentibus animis instillandum mirifice faciunt. Mirabiles illae rerum conversiones, ex parvis saepe initiis natae, quae singula ostendunt saecula, cum providentiae divinae gubernationem, tum humanarum rerum inconstantiam et vanitatem egregie declarant. Neque levem id habet fructum, tot ineptarum opinionum, superstitionum et errorum, quibus orbis Christianus multis adhuc in terris premitur, origines cognoscere. Magnum enim haec cognitio praesidium suppeditat ad veritatem intelligendam, diligendam et fortiter custodiendam. De voluptate ex his, aliisque rebus haurienda, tacebo.[24]

[If those who carry on the pursuit of sacred history avoid these errors, and others I do not mention, they cannot but perform a great service to all mankind, and those especially to whom the superintendence of the sacred mission is entrusted. If one considers how many and how various and dangerous the chances have been which the Christian religion has triumphantly surmounted, one will assuredly feel oneself strengthened and fortified against the menaces, wiles and deceptions of profane men. The many glorious examples of which this history is full will do wonders towards the kindling of piety and the filling of sluggish souls with the love of God. The wonderful reversals of fortune, springing often from small beginnings, which every age displays, loudly declare both the guidance of divine providence and the inconstancy and vanity of human affairs. It is no less profitable to know the origins of the many false beliefs, superstitions and errors, by which

[23] *Institutiones*, p. 7; Maclaine, 1826, I, p. 10. [24] *Institutiones*, pp. 7–8.

the Christian religion is still invaded in several parts of the world. This branch of knowledge affords a mighty aid in knowing, embracing and stoutly preserving the truth. Of the delight arising from this and other pursuits I shall say nothing.][25]

The key term in this long passage is Providence. Mosheim has been intensifying a strictly historical view of the Church. Its life in time is exposed to change, circumstance and instability; the actions of its members within, no less than its adversaries without, are human and imperfect and regularly lead to consequences they cannot foresee. Small beginnings lead to great consequences, and only the most careful narratives can trace, if they cannot explain, how this happens. The pursuit of causation is not a simple, or as we should say scientific, assignment of causes to effects or the reverse, but the unfolding of a tangled web whose patterns do not become simpler as we see what they are; we may indeed never come to the end of tracing the causes of events. This is how historians think, and how they have been learning to think since at latest the time of Tacitus; but it is precisely at this point that the Christian concept of Providence comes into play. A faith or belief in Providence comes from contemplating the infinite complexity of history; we have only to believe that certain outcomes were willed by God, whose ways are more clearly seen to be mysterious the more we consider them, and the density of historical explanation becomes a means of converting secular history into sacred. There is only a minimal need of the miraculous; the relations of cause and effect are not here the expression of regular laws, and the utterly surprising event must occur in a context where everything is surprising and history is the study of surprises. The only chink in the Christian armour is that exactly the same histories can be narrated without mentioning Providence at all. In later chapters of this volume we will consider whether this is a key to the reception of Gibbon's fifteenth and sixteenth chapters.

(ii) Mosheim and Robertson: secular history before the Incarnation

Gibbon read the *De Rebus Christianorum ante Constantinum Magnum* and the *Institutionum . . . libri quattuor* together, but seems to have preferred the deeper analysis of the earlier work to the condensed narrative of the latter. The *Institutiones* present the structure of church history as Mosheim came to organise it: internal and external, prosperous and calamitous, revelatory and providential. Lacking so detailed a preface, the *De Rebus* proceeds more

[25] Trans. JGAP.

directly to the historical conditions obtaining at the time of Christ's birth, found in a summary form in the *Institutiones*. It is of some interest and value to compare this account with William Robertson's sermon on *The Situation of the World at the Time of Christ's Appearance, and its Connection with the Success of his Religion Considered*,[26] delivered in Edinburgh on 6 January 1755. The *De Rebus* had been published in 1753, and the completion of the *Institutiones* is dated in its author's preface on 23 March 1755; he died later in that year. That these authors knew of one another is possible but not necessary; they were engaged in the same enterprise, that of locating a sacred event in the secular history which was relevant to it as it was transcended by it. In asking how far Robertson and Mosheim carried the transcendence of the secular, we need to ask what their secular narratives were.

It had always been necessary to Christians to locate the sacred in the secular, and we know from Jean Le Clerc[27] that a primary structure of the latter was Roman history ('born under Caesar Augustus, suffered under Pontius Pilate'), at the moment when power was passing from *senatus populusque* to *principes* and *imperatores*. In an earlier volume[28] we went back to Eusebius and Augustine in search of the thought that Roman empire, while entailing a loss of liberty, was ordained to further the spread of the Christian religion; the ambivalences of history, in which the hand of Providence might or might not be seen, were thus present from the moment of incarnation. Mosheim knew this well. In the *De Rebus* he remarks:

> Lene ac moderatum erat, si ex forma reipublicae, legumque naturae aestimatur, Romanum imperium.[29]
>
> [Roman dominion was mild and moderate, if measured by the form of government it adopted and by the character of its laws.][30]

Here he cites Walter Moyle's *Essay upon the Constitution of the Roman Government* (1726), Giannone's *Istoria Civile del Regno di Napoli* in a French translation, and Maffei's *Verona Illustrata*; works of advanced character, sympathetic to liberty. He continues:

> Verum felicitati populorum, quae nasci ex aequitate imperii potuisset, cum alia quaedam obsistebant, tum maxime publicanorum, quibus reditus civitatis locari

[26] Robertson, 1996, xi ('Situation', separately paginated); hereafter Robertson, 'Situation'. The pagination is as in the 1755 original. This work is not to be found in the catalogue of Gibbon's library.

[27] Above, p. 122. [28] FDF, chs. 4 and 5. [29] *De Rebus*, p. 3.

[30] Trans. JGAP, as are all translations from the *De Rebus* in this chapter not otherwise ascribed. For earlier translations, consult Vidal, 1813, and Murdock, 1851.

solebant, iniustitia et improbitas praesidum et praetorum, quibus provinciae credebantur, immensa rem suam amplificandi libido, denique ipsius populi Romani non parta tantum tuendi, verumetiam fines proferendi cupiditas. Haec nimirum dominandi sitis perpetua fere bella ciebat et formidolosos in provinciis exercitus poscebat, incolis haud dubie gravissimos: illa vero publicanorum et magistratuum scelera bonis et argento populos spoliabant.[31]

A nineteenth-century translation of this very Augustinian weighing of the case for and against the empire of the *libido dominandi* was:

But whatever promise of happiness the equitable spirit of the original system might hold out to the people, it was constantly checked and counteracted by a variety of causes, and particularly by the rapacity and dishonesty of the publicans to whom the collection of the public revenue was entrusted; the unbounded avarice of the governors of provinces to increase their private wealth; and the insatiable cupidity of the people at large, which displayed itself not merely in the tenacity with which they maintained every part of their conquests, but also in constant readiness to seize all opportunities of extending the bounds of the empire. Whilst, on the one hand, this incessant thirst after dominion gave rise to continual wars, and rendered it necessary constantly to burthen the inhabitants of the provinces with the maintenance of a formidable military force, a thing in itself doubtless sufficiently grievous, the greedy publicans and governors were, on the other hand, fleecing the people of the residue of their property by the most shameful and iniquitous pecuniary exactions.[32]

It is part of the narrative of Decline and Fall; and it is not in order to state the contrary case, but to vindicate the ways of Providence, that Mosheim continues:

Nihilo tamen minus haec unius populi, aut potius hominis, ad tot gentes pertinens dominatio multas adiunctas habebat opportunitates. Per eam (I) multae nationes linguis, moribus, legibus antea disiunctae, arctius sociabantur. (II) Facilius per Romanos aditus ad remotissimas etiam gentes immensis sumtibus aperiebatur. (III) Qui feris antea, immanibus et agrestibus institutis vixerant, Romanorum consuetudine ac legibus sensim mitescebant. (IV) Humaniores artes ac litterae cum philosophia per plurimas gentes fundebantur et ad eos etiam manebant, qui omnem antea hominis dignitatem in robore corporis posuerant. Quibus ex rebus quum et Servatoris legati multum fructus ceperint ad munus suum obeundum et hominum animos vera religione imbuendos rectissime statuunt, qui commodiori tempore filium Dei ad homines descendere potuisse negant.[33]

[None the less, however, this power of one people, or rather one man, over so many nations was associated with many collateral outcomes. (I) Through it many peoples hitherto separated by languages, customs and laws were brought more

[31] *De Rebus*, p. 3, continuing. Cf. *Institutiones*, pp. II–12; Maclaine, 1826, I, pp. 17–18.
[32] Vidal, 1813; see Murdock, 1851, I, p. 3. [33] *De Rebus*, p. 3, continuing.

closely together. (II) Access even to the remotest of people became easier through the immense expenditures of the Romans. (III) Peoples who had formerly lived by fierce, monstrous and savage customs were gradually civilised by Roman manners and laws. (IV) The more refined arts, letters and philosophy took root and spread among the majority of peoples, who had previously seen the dignity of man only in brute strength. Seeing that the Apostles of our Saviour were aided by all these things in bringing men to obey his precepts and the true religion to their minds, it is clear that they judge rightly who affirm that the son of God could have chosen to descend among men at no better time.]

Until the closing sentence, it is the argument of Gibbon's second chapter; with the loss of liberty came the spread of civilised manners (it is at this point that Mosheim cites Nicolas Bergier's work on the roads of the Roman empire, which Gibbon was to study in 1764,[34] as facilitating the spread of civilisation). There also arise the possibilities that Christ might become no more than a teacher of morality, and that for Enlightened thinkers[35] the historical function of Christianity might be to bring about a revolution in manners. But the next step in the argument of the *De Rebus* will be the claim that as the refinement of manners by empire aided the spread of the true religion, so the universal degeneration of morals rendered Christ's mission to men a historic necessity; like Gibbon's Persians, the Romans were becoming both civilised and corrupt. This assertion arises from the study of religion before Christ, to which Mosheim now proceeds.

Like Mosheim, William Robertson as historian of the sacred was a student of the ways of Providence. His sermon opens:

> There is no employment more delightful to a devout mind than the contemplation of the divine wisdom in the government of this world. The civil history of mankind opens a wide field for this pious exercise. Careful observers may often, by the light of reason, form probable conjectures with regard to the plan of God's Providence, and can discover a skilful hand directing the revolutions of human affairs, and compassing the best ends by the most effectual and surprising means: But sacred history, by drawing aside that veil which covers the counsels of the Almighty, lays open his designs to the view of his creatures; and we can there trace the steps which he taketh towards accomplishing them with more certainty, and greater pleasure.[36]

The Scottish Moderate is perhaps closer to explaining God's ways by generalising from the grand patterns of philosophic history than is the more Tacitist German Lutheran. Anticipating what he will say in the *View of the Progress of Society in Europe* a decade and a half later,[37] Robertson tells us that the peoples of Europe were originally distributed into small states

[34] Ibid.; EEG, p. 266. [35] E.g. Adam Ferguson; FDF, p. 408.
[36] Robertson, 1996, xi, 'Situation . . . ', pp. 5–6. [37] NCG, p. 279.

or republics, in which a fierce civic virtue reigned and every citizen acted in the view of his equals and the magistrates. Roman virtue conquered the virtue of every other people – we are in the mental world described in the third volume of this series – but in so doing, Roman liberty destroyed itself,[38] and the known world entered a condition of demoralisation, from which it was hoped – apparently not only by the Jews – that a messiah would appear to rescue and redeem it. Only the sacred could redeem mankind, and only Providence could choose the redeemer and the time of his coming. It might seem, however, that redemption must take the form of a civil morality higher than the possibly barbaric virtue of the primitive republics, and that the function of both empire and Christianity was to introduce new manners, preparing the way – since we are in Scotland – for politeness, commerce and enlightened religion.

Mosheim tells a comparable, but somewhat less republican, story, with an emphasis on polytheism and Roman religious statecraft. He has less to say about the virtue of the ancient republics, and says merely that in antiquity each people had its own gods, who were annexed by the Romans and sometimes assimilated to the Roman pantheon, to the confusion of subsequent scholarship.[39] He insists, like most historians of his time, that these gods were entirely tolerant of one another – he and Maclaine spend time telling us that the religious wars of the Egyptians were totemic, not doctrinal, in character[40] – since the ancients thought of the cosmos as a vast republic or confederation (*civitas*) in which there were as many gods as there were peoples.[41] He departs further from the republican thesis, however, by failing to join Gibbon in insisting that the city's worship of its gods was political in character, conducted by magistrates and public officers. Instead, he depicts all ancient religion as superstitious – for Robertson, superstition is a consequence of the loss of liberty and virtue – and says that every god was attended by priests, a cunning (*callidus*) class of deceivers and manipulators, who claimed a special relation with the gods they served, and kept the people in awe by prestidigitation and persecution.[42] This is not the Enlightened image of priestcraft as typically the product of monotheism and revelation, but the Christian image of idolatry which will appear at the centre of Mosheim's account of the persecution of the Christians by the pagans – instituted first by the priests, only afterwards by the magistrates. An *érudit* might ask him for his evidence of the priests' existence, and suggest that philosophers might be equally to blame.

[38] Robertson, 'Situation', p. 22. [39] *Institutiones*, p. 13; Maclaine, 1826, I, p. 21.
[40] *Institutiones*, p. 13; Maclaine, 1826, I, pp. 21–2. [41] *De Rebus*, pp. 6–7.
[42] *De Rebus*, p. 9; *Institutiones*, pp. 15–16; Maclaine, 1826, I, pp. 26–7.

Robertson and Mosheim go on, in their several scenarios, to contend that the ancient superstitions failed to teach morality,[43] so that – especially in Robertson – the age of empire was an age of universal depravity (there is of course much Roman rhetoric on this subject), and it is no accident that the redeemer of mankind was born under Augustus, the author of imperial government. So universal was corruption, they both say, that only a divine intervention could begin to cure it, and this is Robertson's answer to the question implicitly posed by St Paul: why was the mystery of God's mercy revealed to mankind only in this age of the world?[44] Empire had promoted depravity, yet facilitated the spread of morality. There remains, however, a further question: was depravity under empire the climax of the Fall of Man, or a providential preparation for the mission of Christ, in its own way a proof of God's governance? To a historian and theologian, there might be questions beyond even this. Was not the redemption of mankind being enclosed within a purely Roman and Jewish history? Robertson's sermon seems to conclude by suggesting that the extension of the Christian message to all humanity has been reserved by Providence to his own time and that of his hearers, when a global commerce has at last made it possible – beginning, he tells the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge, with the civilisation, and redemption, of the Highlands and Islands.[45]

And – one question more – does the rational religion favoured by both historians present Christ's redemptive mission less as a sacrificial atonement than as a reform of morality, prohibiting slavery, polygamy and divorce (Robertson)[46] while reinforcing the laws of human society with the promise of immortality? It was part of the Enlightened Christian case against the Fathers and the Councils that they elaborated theology while failing to preach morality, and Maclaine the translator of the *Institutiones* goes beyond Mosheim in filling his text with invocations of the beauty, purity, simplicity and universal accessibility of the original Gospels, from which disputes over Christ's nature were a sophisticated departure. Mosheim in the *De Rebus* is concerned with the relations between morality and immortality in ancient thought, and dissents from Warburton's contention, in the *Divine Legation of Moses*, that the function of the mysteries was to provide an esoteric doctrine of the soul's immortality. What he has to say on this subject, he remarks, is already set down in his commentary on Cudworth's *True Intellectual System*.[47] To find him distancing himself from the Lockean

[43] Robertson, 'Situation', pp. 19–23; *De Rebus*, p. 5; *Institutiones*, p. 15; Maclaine, 1826, I, p. 25.
[44] Robertson, 'Situation', pp. [5], 9. [45] Ibid., pp. 53–4.
[46] Ibid., pp. 32–8 (marriage), 39–46 (slavery). [47] *De Rebus*, p. 9.

Warburton in his own time, and the Platonist Cudworth in the preceding century, is to embark upon a debate in which Robertson will not accompany him.

(iii) philosophy unredeemed: the second temple, athens and alexandria

Robertson's sermon did not oblige him to write a *historia ecclesiastica*, and there is no reason to suppose he ever thought of doing so; his work as a historian was concerned entirely with post-Roman Europe, America and India. Mosheim on the other hand was a committed ecclesiastical historian, engaged at the end of his career in constructing two massive surveys of his subject, one ending with Constantine and the other in his own time. It is not surprising, therefore, that his account of the state of the world before and during Christ's life on earth includes historical conditions that will dominate the Church's life after Christ's departure, so that he is already taking account of a theme we know to be central to *historia ecclesiastica* since its foundation: the philosophy of the Greeks, encountered by the Apostles from the moment of the Mission to the Gentiles. Robertson has nothing to say about this, but he does speak to a subject which Mosheim, in both the *De Rebus* and the *Institutiones*, postpones until he has dealt with Gentile philosophy as a principal feature of the state of the world at the time of Christ's appearance. This subject is the condition at that time of the Jews – *de statu Iudaeorum*[48] – and its subordinate place in Mosheim's history is the more striking in the light of its centrality as a moment in Christian sacred history. The moment is that at which Christ's messiahship is the more clearly defined by the Jews' failure to recognise it; and their consequent disappearance from sacred history – in which they no longer execute God's purposes – leads to their further disappearance from secular history in the catastrophe of the Jewish War, after which they cease to act as a state or a people. We have seen that, in the absence of a canonical history of these events, which Jesus had prophesied, Christian historians were left with the narrative related by Josephus, in which they found plentiful evidence of guilt and punishment. Neither Mosheim nor Robertson, however, is much concerned with this history, or with maintaining – though they do not reject – the quasi-eschatological thesis of the Jews as a people under punishment until the end of days. As historians, however (if Robertson was already one), they find something in need of historical explanation: how it

[48] Ibid., pp. 35–61.

was that the people chosen as vehicle of the First Dispensation came to fail utterly to accept or understand the Second.

Both, it is true, are inclined to treat Jewish history as forming no separate narrative, and situate it in a universal (and almost secular) context of the rise of empire, the loss of pagan liberty and virtue, and the consequent decay of morals and increase of superstition. Robertson has little more to say of the Jewish problem than:

> The national character of the Jews seems to have been deeply tinctured with superstition. Their early education in *Egypt*, the example of neighbouring nations, the influence of the climate, but, above all, the perverseness of their own disposition, rendered this impression indelible. Obstinately resisting all the endeavours employed by the divine Lawgiver to repress or to extirpate it; this superstitious spirit broke out on every occasion. Delighted with the ceremonial prescriptions of the law, the Jews utterly neglected the moral: And, fond of such rites as please the imagination, they undervalued those duties which improve the heart.[49]

This is not the superstition of polytheists and idolaters, but neither is it the failure to set grace above the law (as Robertson's Calvinist adversaries may well have noted). Jewish 'superstition' is a preference for the ceremonial over the moral, and for the imagination over the heart. The last proposition may set us on the late Enlightenment journey from reason to sentiment; but, more fundamentally, Robertson's (and perhaps Mosheim's) narrative defines the failure of pre-Christian antiquity (including Israel's) as a failure of civic morals, and seems to imply that the purpose of Christ's incarnation was not other than a restitution of morals by the promise of immortality. There is another implication, closer to the history of historiography. The Jewish propensity to apostasy is being rendered aboriginal and inherent; we look behind the Babylonian captivity to the Egyptian, and the Golden Calf stands beside the Tables of the Law. From Exodus through the Judges and the Kings, through the Exilic prophets to the works of Josephus, it was possible to read the history of the first people chosen by God as a history of incessant apostasies, backslidings and whorings after false gods, from which only the most terrible warnings and punishments served to redeem the people. Christian writers took up this theme and carried it to finality; but it raised the possibility that God's original choice of his people had been a failure, even an error of which the Almighty had repented; and Gibbon was to suggest this, not without malice.[50] 'How odd of God

[49] Robertson, 'Situation', pp. 25–6. [50] Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 448–9.

to choose the Jews', a witticism of the twentieth century,[51] could convey deeper problems.

Mosheim confronts the problem of Jewish failure to recognise Christ more thoroughly and systematically than Robertson had time for. In the *Institutiones* he begins to answer the question.

> Caussae tam insignis in illo populo, quem ipse Deus ex reliquis elegerat, corruptionis variae commemorari possunt.[52]
>
> [Various causes may be recorded of so great a corruption in that people whom God himself had chosen from among the others.[53]] (Maclaine: But whence arose such enormous degrees of corruption in that very nation, which God had, in a peculiar manner, separated from an idolatrous world to be the depository of divine truth?)[54]

The usual Christian explanation – the Jews had expected a liberating and conquering messiah and were unable to comprehend the revolutionary change to the redeeming person of Jesus – is not absent from these pages; but something more in the nature of history is implied by the introduction of the term 'corruption'. It may be suggested in general that Christian writers were not much interested in the period of the Second Temple; for them the Exilic prophets had foretold the coming of Christ, and all that remained was to await it. Nevertheless, with the Captivity Jewish history had entered that of the Four Empires: Babylonian, Persian, Macedonian and Roman; and though the Danielic scheme does not directly appear in these works of the 1750s, the sequence composing it provides means of explaining the 'corruption' of the post-Exilic Jews as a product of the history of empire. Mosheim shares Robertson's perception that the change from republic to empire destroys ancient virtue and renders a civil morality more necessary than ever but harder to maintain, so that Christ must come to restore and transform it; and this is or should have been true of the Jews. To this he adds, however, that the succession of empires not only demoralised Jewish culture but imported religious practices and philosophical beliefs, Persian, Greek and Roman, hostile both to the original monotheism of the Covenant and the Law and to the acceptance of Christ's divinity. This is the point at which Mosheim takes up, as Robertson's sermon does not, the thesis he has already begun to establish, that the corruption of the ancient world included the presence of philosophies incompatible with true religion and the practice of morality. These will persist, furthermore, after the Christian revelation and play their part in its intermittent corruption.

[51] *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (edn of 1949), p. 149b. [52] *Institutiones*, p. 24.
[53] Trans. JGAP. [54] Maclaine, 1826, I, p. 43.

Duplex autem in universum philosophandi forma, descendente ad homines Dei filio, inter gentes non male moratas regnebat: altera *Graeca*, altera *Orientalis*. Quas quidem binas philosophandi rationes qui non discernunt, quod multi faciunt, illi mihi rerum veterum non nimis gnari, resque non modice disiunctas miscere videntur. Illa proprie *philosophia* nominabatur. Hanc vero γνῶσιν sive *cognitionem* dicebant, qui Graeco sermone utebantur: cuis vocabuli vis ut intelligatur, nomen θεου sive Dei adiici debet.[55]

[Two modes of philosophising reigned everywhere among civilised peoples, at the time when the son of God came down among men: the one Greek, the other oriental. Those who do not distinguish between these two, as many do not, seem to me unskilled in antiquities and inclined to combine things that are very different. The former is properly called 'philosophy'; the latter is what users of the Greek language call *gnōsis* or 'knowledge', a term which must be understood by the addition of *theos* or 'God'.]

We have stepped back into the world of Beausobre – from whom Mosheim seems anxious to keep his distance – and of the historians of gnosticism and Platonism since Irenaeus and Eusebius. To this already familiar narrative Mosheim is prepared to make a massive addition, that of the neo-Platonism of Alexandria,[56] which will dominate many chapters of his history; but first he must show philosophy as contributing to the corruption of the Second Temple. In both the *De Rebus* and the *Institutiones* he shows the successive empires combining to introduce Greek and oriental philosophy into the religion of the Jews. From the sentence just quoted about the many causes of its corruption, he goes on:

Multas primum Iudaeorum maiores fatuas et inanes sententias ex Chaldaea, finitimisque regionibus secum in Palestinam retulerant, quorum prorsus nescii fuerant gentis conditores. Ab eo deinde tempore, quo Asiam ALEXANDER M. subegerat, mores et dogmata Graecorum ad Persas, Syros, Arabes et ad ipsos etiam Iudaeos litterarum et philosophiae antea rudes, transierant. Itinera porro, quae plures Iudaei in vicinas terras, Aegyptium in primis et Phoeniciam, rei quaerendi caussa, instituere solebant, perfecerunt, varii ut gentium profanarum errores et commenta ad Hebraeos commearent. HERODES denique, eiusque filii, Romani etiam procuratores et milites multis sine dubio peregrinis institutis et sordibus terram repleverant. Alias illi rationes facile addent, qui Historiae Iudaeorum a Maccabaeorum temporibus non expertes sunt.[57]

[In the first place, the ancestors of the Jews had brought back to the land of Palestine many foolish and empty opinions from Chaldea and the adjacent regions, quite unknown to the founders of their nation. In the subsequent period, when

[55] *De Rebus*, pp. 18–19. A note cites Thomasius in explaining how the meaning of γνῶσιν is changed from the knowledge of things to the metaphysics of reality.
[56] *De Rebus*, pp. 25–6. [57] *Institutiones*, p. 24.

Alexander the Great subdued Asia, the manners and beliefs of the Greeks had spread to the Persians, Syrians and Arabs and even to the Jews themselves, all hitherto ignorant of letters and philosophy. The journeys which many Jews used to make in search of business, chiefly to Egypt and Phoenicia, brought it about that many of the errors and fictions of the heathen peoples were made known to the Hebrews. Finally, Herod, his sons, and Roman officials and soldiers had without doubt filled the land with foreign usages and vices. Many other considerations may be added by those with no more than a general knowledge of Jewish history from the time of the Maccabees.][58]

Corruption precedes apostasy, and the history of the Jews is subordinated to the history of empire. But it has already been explained that part of this history is the history of philosophy, in both the cultures in which it appears. An immediately preceding passage in the *Institutiones* runs:

Maculis his, quibus populus Iudaicus veniente ad eum CHRISTO deformatus erat, addi omnino debet multorum erga Orientalium populorum de origine mundi philosophiam, filiamque eius certissimam, *Cabbalam*, quam vocant Iudaei, studium. Hoc enim multos Iudaeorum imbutos fuisse, cum ipsi sacri codicis novi Testamenti libri, tum antiqua rerum Christianarum Historia neminem dubitare sinunt. Et certum est, multarum sectarum Gnosticarum conditores Iudaeos fuisse. Qui hanc sectabantur philosophandi formam, de veteris Testamenti Deo, de Mose, de mundi originibus, de Messia secus, quasi reliqui Iudaei, sentire debebant. Mundi enim conditorem differre a supremo Numine statuebant, imperiumque ejus in humanum genus a Messia destructum iri, censebant: Qua ex opinione portenta nascebantur valde a vera Iudaeorum religione aliena.[59]

[To these stains by which the Jewish people were disfigured as Christ was about to come to them, must certainly be added the study of many beliefs tending to the philosophy of the Orientals concerning the origin of the world, and its undoubted daughter that the Jews call Cabbala. Both the sacred books of the New Testament and the history of the early Christians leave no doubt that many of them were infected by this. And it is certain that the founders of many gnostic sects were Jews. Those who followed this kind of philosophy must have thought very differently from their fellow Jews about the God of the Old Testament, Moses, the origins of the world and the Messiah. They declared the creator of the world to differ from the supreme godhead and held that his empire over the human race was to be destroyed by the Messiah. From this doctrine were born many monstrous consequences altogether alien to the true religion of the Jews.][60]

Christian scholars in the first half of the eighteenth century for the most part regarded Kabbala as an ancient phenomenon, evidence of some kind of dualism among semi-orientalised Jews returning from the Captivity. The

[58] Maclaine, 1826, I, pp. 43–4. [59] *Institutiones*, p. 23. [60] Maclaine, 1826, I, pp. 42–3.

gnostic separation of God from creation was clearly incompatible with the Mosaic narrative – even if, with Beausobre, one regarded the first verses of Genesis as ambiguous on the pre-existence of matter – and with most Jewish and Christian accounts of the Messiah. The Judeophobe gnosticism which identified the fallen creator with the God of Israel, and held that a Messiah possibly Christ had been sent to free the world from him, is clearly a counter-image to that presented by Mosheim, the same gnosticism recounted by authors not Jewish, and it would be possible to ask which came first.[61] To Mosheim, all gnosticisms had an origin neither Jewish nor Greek, in the philosophy (or *gnōsis*) he described as 'Oriental'; and while he does not deny that this sometimes infected Greek (and Christian) thinking, he is bent on maintaining the distinction between *gnōsis* and *philosophia*. He therefore holds back – while frequently citing Beausobre – from endorsing the latter's thesis that all pre-Christian (and some Christian) philosophy was unable to conceive of God creating matter *ex nihilo*; a thesis which we have seen could have the effect of pushing Plato's *Timaeus* in a Zoroastrian or a Spinozistic direction. He may have been moved by considerations we might think 'orientalist', but his principal purpose in maintaining the historical autonomy of Greek philosophy is to construct a narrative culminating, not in gnosticism or Manichaeism, but in the neo-Platonism of Alexandria, whose origins are not dualist but eclectic and do not lie immediately in Beausobre's fundamental problem of creation. As had always been somewhat the case in Christian historiography, the gnostic heresies remained a gigantic, fascinating and infuriating side-issue; the mainstream was led through different channels.

The account we have been considering, of the religion of the Temple infected by Greek and oriental thinking, occurs after Mosheim's initial and detailed study of philosophy among the Greeks and Romans before Christ's coming, and can be read in the context this provides. The problems of Plato's Demiurgus as lesser creator, and of Plato's trinity as both inferior to and prospective of the Christian, are of course foreshadowed in this chapter, and will recur in both of Mosheim's histories; but the thrust of his argument at this stage is not unlike Robertson's, in that it accuses the ancient philosophies of neglecting to teach morality, and so contributing to the general corruption of humanity which Christ must come to reform. This is not unconnected with their theological insufficiency, but it is secondary to it.

[61] The reader is reminded that this is a study of the Christian historians' understanding of gnosticism, not concerned with its history as reconstructed by recent research.

Deus ARISTOTELIS id est, quod principium motus in machina, natura contemplando beata, rerumque humanarum nescia. Eiusmodi Deum, qui modice ab Epicuri Diis distat, nihil est cur ames, vel metuas. Anima utrum perennis visa fuerit huic philosopho, an mortalis, incertum saltim est. Quidnam vero solidi et sani de virtute ac pietate potest is, qui divinam tollit providentiam, nec obscure animis exitium indicit?[62]

Providence and immortality move centre, as necessary to piety and virtue. Maclaine's translation is worth reading.

The nature of God, as it is explained by Aristotle, resembles the principle that gives motion to a machine; it is a nature happy in the contemplation of itself, and entirely regardless of human affairs; and such a divinity, who differs but little from the god of Epicurus, cannot reasonably be the object either of love or fear. With respect to the doctrine of this philosopher concerning the human soul, it is uncertain, to say no more, whether he believed its immortality, or not. What then could be expected from such a philosophy? Could any thing solid and satisfactory, in favour of piety and virtue, be hoped for from a system which excluded from the universe a divine Providence and insinuated the mortality of the human soul?[63]

Morality rests on metaphysical, and perhaps revealed, foundations. Plato has gone further in the right direction, but not far enough.

Ceteros philosophos omnes superasse PLATO videtur: nec iniuria. Deum enim libertate, potentia et ingenio magnum rerum universitati praefecit, hominibusque et quod sperent et quod metuant post corporis obitum ostendit. Sed ut omittam totam eius doctrinam imbecillis admodum fundamentis niti, praetereaque perobscuram esse, summus ille conditor orbis, quem laudat, multis caret virtutibus, certoque loco et spatio continetur. Quae de anima, daemonibusque sciscit, ad superstitionem gignendam et fovendam mirifice valent. Neque ingens morali eius sapientiae pretium constituet, qui cunctas eius partes diligenter inter se contulerit et ad principia sua revocaverit. (n. De vitiis philosophiae Platonicae copiose, nec satis tamen accurate, disseruit FRANC. BALTUS in libro Gallico *Defense des Peres accusez de Platonisme*. Paris. 1711.)[64]

To mistake the Creator is still to mistake the Redeemer, but the latter may be in danger of reduction to a teacher of morals. Maclaine's translation is characteristically wordy, but contains an interesting objection to his author's text.

Plato is generally looked upon as superior to all the other philosophers in wisdom; and this eminent rank does not seem to have been undeservedly conferred upon him. He taught that the universe was governed by a Being, glorious in power and wisdom, and possessing perfect liberty and independence. He extended also the

[62] *Institutiones*, p. 18. [63] Maclaine, 1826, I, p. 31. [64] *Institutiones*, p. 18.

views of mortals beyond the grave, and showed them, in futurity, prospects adapted to excite their hopes, and to work upon their fears. His doctrine, however, beside the weakness of the foundations on which it rests, and the obscurity with which it is often expressed, has other considerable defects. It represents the Supreme Creator of the world as destitute of many perfections,

(n. This accusation seems to be carried too far by Dr Mosheim . . . What probably gave occasion to this animadversion of our learned author, was the erroneous notion of Plato, concerning the *invincible malignity* and corruption of *matter*, which the divine power had not been sufficient to reduce entirely to order . . .)

and confined to a certain determinate portion of space. Its decisions, with respect to the soul and daemons, seem calculated to beget and nourish superstition. Nor will the moral philosophy of Plato appear worthy of such a high degree of admiration, if we attentively examine and compare its various parts, and reduce them to their principles. (There is an ample account of the defects of the Platonic philosophy in a work entitled Defense des Peres accusés de Platonisme, par Franc. Baltus; but there is more learning than accuracy in that performance.)[65]

Beausobre's thesis will not quite go away; but Maclaine emphasises the ambivalence of Christian feelings towards Plato, who both anticipates Incarnation and Trinity, and falls short of them, looking back towards the problem of matter and creation. From this point Mosheim proceeds towards his account of cabbalism and gnosticism among the Jews, but does not do so before dwelling, especially in the *Institutiones*, on the philosophy which will displace gnosticism as his history of pre-Constantinian religious culture develops.

Hinc nova in Aegypto, Alexandriae maxime, philosophiae ratio nascebatur, quam *Eclecticam* dicebant. Cuius etsi POTAMON quidam, Alexandrinus, parens esse perhibetur; suas tamen haec opinio difficultates habet. Servatoris nostri aetate Alexandriae hanc sectam floruisse, ex PHILONE, Iudaeo, manifestum est, qui ex eius praescripto philosophatur. *Eclectici* hi primas quidam inter Philosophos PLATONI dabent: at quaecumque in aliorum philosophorum opinionibus placebant, libere cum PLATONIS sententiis coniungebant. (Vid. GODOFR. OLEARIUS *de philosophia Eclectica*. JAC. BRUCKERUS et alii.)[66]

Hence arose a new form of philosophy in Egypt, and principally at Alexandria, which was called the *Eclectic*, whose founder, according to some, was Potamon, an Alexandrian, though this opinion is not without its difficulties. It manifestly appears from the testimony of Philo the Jew, who was himself one of this sect, that this philosophy was in a flourishing state at Alexandria, when our Saviour

[65] Maclaine, 1826, I, pp. 32–3.
[66] *Institutiones*, pp. 18–19. The first accounts of gnosticism and dualism appear at a comparable point in the *De Rebus* (pp. 26–31).

was upon the earth. The Eclectics held Plato in the highest esteem, though they made no scruple to join, with his doctrines, whatever they thought conformable to reason in the tenets and opinions of the other philosophers.[67]

That a sophisticated philosophy was being taught at Alexandria, within travelling distance of Galilee and Jerusalem, when Jesus's recorded teachings were quite untouched by it, furnishes the latter with a historical context they will never lose; and for reasons yet to appear, but known to Gibbon, eclecticism, otherwise called neo-Platonism, will pose greater problems to the gospel than any appearing on the wilder shores of gnosticism. Mosheim goes on to his chapters on the Jews, but then puts them aside to develop his history of the Church.

(iv) apostolic christianity: the *ecclesia hierosolymitana*

The *De Rebus*, and the *Institutiones* two years later, both narrate history by centuries (reckoned according to the accepted Christian chronology). The former work is the more detailed relation, and does not share the latter's organisation into history internal and external, prosperous and adverse. Both, however, pursue the same themes: the government of the Church, the spread of Christianity with its accompanying persecutions and the history of doctrine, shaped by the response to alien beliefs in the form of philosophy. Mosheim connects these topics so as to construct a history distinctively his own. The Son of God, his narrative begins (after a survey of the state of the pagan and Jewish worlds before that time), descended *humanae iunctus naturae*, as an infallible teacher (*doctor*), a bail or surety in the court of God (*vas in divino foro*) and a king.[68] He proclaimed himself by the performance of miracles,[69] and his death and resurrection

nihil amplius debere homines divinae iustitiae demonstrabat[70]

[declared that men owed nothing further to the divine justice].[71]

He had already chosen Apostles,

viros plebeios, pauperes, illiteratos . . . ne humanis et naturalibus causis fructus legationis eorum tribui posset.[72]

[men of low birth, poor and illiterate . . . so that the fruits of the task committed to them could not be attributed to human and natural causes].[73]

[67] Maclaine, 1826, I, p. 3. [68] *De Rebus*, pp. 62–3; *Institutiones*, p. 25; Maclaine, 1826, I, p. 47.
[69] *De Rebus*, pp. 65–6; *Institutiones*, p. 26; Maclaine, 1826, I, p. 49.
[70] *Institutiones*, p. 28; *De Rebus*, p. 74. [71] Cf. Maclaine, 1826, I, p. 53.
[72] *Institutiones*, p. 26. [73] Maclaine, 1826, I, p. 50.

For similar reasons he chose to appear, after his resurrection, only to them and in private, since hostile crowds, affected by beliefs in magic, would have condemned his appearance in public as mere necromancy.[74] There is already an opposition, and therefore a relation, between corrupt and superstitious philosophy on the one hand and the intellectual poverty and simplicity of the Apostles on the other. This develops as Mosheim considers the *effusio Spiritus Sancti in apostolos*[75] on the day of Pentecost. In the *De Rebus* he doubts whether God's power to work miracles was imparted even to Peter, and suggests that when the Apostles healed the sick and raised the dead they merely called on Christ to do these things;[76] but in the *Institutiones* we hear of an

in ipsis verbis eorum incredibilis quaedam et divina vis animos flectendi,[77]

significantly expanded by Maclaine to read

Their very language possessed an incredible energy, an amazing power of sending light into the understanding and conviction into the heart.[78]

These words occur in the context of Mosheim's first discussion in this book of the relation of human to divine causes in the spread of the Christian religion. The divine power of the Word is driving the speech of the Apostles to triumph over the legalism of the Jews (to whom it is a stumbling block) and the philosophy of the Greeks (to whom it is foolishness). It is no doubt Gibbon's omission of this inspiration and charisma that offended his readers, but Mosheim is inserting it in a narrative not altogether unlike his. The word being preached is divine and incomprehensible, and at the same time intellectually simple and immediately apprehensible, and the illiteracy – meaning the lack of verbal sophistication – of the Apostles is an important means of making it both. Mosheim is beginning to tell a story of the progressive corruption of the gospel by Greek philosophy and Jewish and oriental esotericism, which will contribute to the rise both of heresies and of a clergy who are also a clerisy; Christian learning will play an ambiguous role in his narrative. Its origins, however, lie at the beginnings of ecclesiastical history, and are seen to have been a practical and cultural necessity.

Omnes autem hi duodecim CHRISTI legati quum homines essent rudes ac litterarum humanarum nescii, in illa vero Christianae civitatis infantia homo desideraretur, qui et Iudaeorum magistros et gentium philosophos propriis armis invadere

[74] *De Rebus*, pp. 74–6; *Institutiones*, p. 28; Maclaine, 1826, I, p. 53. [75] *De Rebus*, pp. 76–7.
[76] Ibid. [77] *Institutiones*, p. 31. [78] Maclaine, 1826, I, pp. 59–60.

ac iugulare posset: ipse IESUS CHRISTUS de coelo paullo post decimum tertium constituebat Apostolum, SAULUM, qui PAULUS deinde vocari maluit, insensissimum Christianorum hostem, at litterarum Iudaicarum in primis peritum, nec Graecarum ignarum.[79]

All these Apostles were men without education, and absolutely ignorant of letters and philosophy; and yet, in the infancy of the Christian Church, it was necessary that there should be, at least, some one defender of the gospel, who, versed in the learned arts, might be able to combat the Jewish doctors and the pagan philosophers with their own arms. For this purpose, Jesus himself, by an extraordinary voice from heaven, called to his service a thirteenth Apostle, whose name was Saul (afterwards Paul), and whose acquaintance both with Jewish and Greek learning was very considerable.[80]

The risen Christ must intervene from heaven, and Paul must experience a calling unlike that of any other Apostle, to mediate the gospel's entry into human literacy, erudition and disputation. The Mission to the Gentiles, conducted by Paul, will threaten the gospel with absorption into ancient philosophy; but the propagation of Christianity is for the present carried on by a diversity of Apostles using a diversity of means. The four Gospels are written, and collated in the lifetime of St John (Mosheim has a note indicating the importance of reviewing this process in response to the criticism of the unbeliever Toland[81]) but the mission is still conducted orally and as a matter of social experience. We meet for the first time with invective against those who would reduce it to a merely secular process. The followers of Hobbes have suggested that conversions were effected by charitable donations to the poor, the outcast and the criminal; but, says Mosheim in the *De Rebus*, it is contrary to reason to suppose that such beneficence would produce such a result.

Et nesciuntne, aut nescire nolunt, quibus haec sententia placet, ignavis et laborem fugientibus nihil loci datum fuisse inter primos Christianos, PAULUM que vetuisse, victum illis praebere, qui victum sibimet ipsi laborando quaerere nollent? 2 Thess. III, 6.7.8.9.10. Nesciuntne, aut nescire nolunt, segnes, vitiosos, voluptati deditos mandato Apostolorum ex coetu Christianorum exclusos fuisse? Nesciuntne, aut nescire nolunt, quamlibet Christianorum familiam, pauperes suos alere debuisse, eosque tantum publico sumtu nutritos fuisse, quibus nulli erant cognati, quorum ope iuvari poterant?[82]

[Do those who believe this not know, or do they choose not to know, that dissolute persons and work-dodgers were allowed no place among the first Christians? That

[79] *Institutiones*, p. 29.
[80] Maclaine, 1826, I, pp. 65–6; 'insensissimum . . . hostem' omitted. Mosheim seems to rate Paul's Jewish erudition above his Greek.
[81] *De Rebus*, p. 87. [82] Ibid., pp. 89–90.

Paul forbade the offer of food to those who would not earn food through their own labour? Do they not know, or do they choose not to know, that the idle, the vicious and the licentious were excluded from the Christian congregation by command of the Apostles? Do they not know, or do they choose not to know, that though the Christian community was required to maintain its own poor, all those who could find none to help them were fed at the public expense?]

And those are no better who think that any were converted to Christianity by distaste for the scandalous lives of heathen priests. Mosheim's scornful and repetitious vehemence is part of a larger argument: not only did conversion often entail loss of friends and status, and even considerable personal danger, but Christian values were often incompatible with sociable manners and the natural instincts of the human mind. Christ's offer of redemption, and the search for salvation through divine grace, were supernatural in character, and ran so far beyond ordinary human behaviour as to bring upon Christians the suspicion of enmity to the *res publica* and the *genus humanum*. They were not in fact social failures, but men and women who had risen above mere sociability.

Repugnabat disciplina, quam Servatoris auctoritate ac mandato legati eius per orbem terrarum circumferebant, non modo naturae humanae voluntati et inclinationibus, verum etiam populorum omnium moribus, legibus et opinionibus: praecones vero eius homines erant ab omnibus illis rebus relicti, quae animos dociles reddere ac ad adsentiendum et obediendum flectere possunt. Igitur nihil illis relinquitur, qui caussas tam repentinae propagationis Christianae religionis . . . reddere volunt, quam ut pro certissimis habeant . . .

[The doctrine which the Apostles of our Saviour spread around the world by his command and authority was contrary, both to the desires and instincts of human nature, and to the manners, laws and beliefs of all peoples. Its heralds were men who had left behind every thing that makes men docile and disposes them to assent and obedience. Nothing, therefore, remains to those who seek the causes of so rapid a spread of the Christian religion but to take it as certain . . .]

that the Apostles were endowed with miraculous powers beyond the ordinary laws of nature.

Fac, falsa haec esse: nec intelliges amplius, qua fieri ratione potuerit, ut tanta hominum multitudo tam exiguo temporis spatio sacra Christiano sponte probaret, et cum vitae, fortunarum, honorisque periculo et maiorum religionibus et voluptatis illecebris praeferret?[83]

[83] Ibid.

[Suppose all this to be false: you will not have fully understood how it happened that such a multitude of men, in so short a space of time, willingly accepted the sacred truths of Christianity and, at risk of life, fortune and advancement, set them above the religion of their ancestors and all the delights of pleasure.]

Mosheim is at a crucial point in his history, to which, perhaps, he will never fully return. He has begun to explain the origins of persecution, and of that he will say much more. He has also laid down that Christianity is a religion of grace, above and sometimes beyond the laws of human nature; and here he is at odds with the Enlightened assertion that it is contained within natural sociability and the history of human manners. He must assert somewhere that *gratia non tollit naturam sed perficit*, and he must confront all those ancients and moderns who have wished to diminish Christ's nature so that it is subordinate to his Father. To say that the gospel is a vehicle of grace is to say that its propagation was driven by something above the causes operating in society and history; but he is not content with the claim, already made, that the utterance of the Word alone was enough to produce supernatural results. The Apostles must possess miraculous powers, as signs reinforcing their authority to speak the Word; yet the need for this is historically finite, since a time will come, and has come, when it is no longer operative.

In this narrative the Apostles played a central and debated role. It would have to be decided not only whether their supernatural powers had passed to their successors, but also whether Christ had or had not conferred upon them specific authority to be transmitted to specific successors. Here Mosheim encountered a problem we have met before: the historical inadequacy of the book of Acts, which told us nothing whatever about most of the original twelve. He sets little store by the traditions which have them travelling to great distances, founding churches and dying as martyrs at the ends of the earth,[84] and the Protestant dislike of a multitude of intercessors between God and the soul emerges, not so much in a desire to reduce the number of martyrs as in a reminder that the word means 'witness' and that there are other ways of witnessing to the truth than dying for it.[85] It may be, then, that the unrecorded Apostles did not perish as missionaries, but remained as ministers in lands perhaps not so distant; and after a lengthy study of both Jewish and Roman persecution down to Nero,[86] the *De Rebus* proceeds to an account of the *ecclesia Hierosolymitana*, consisting mainly of

[84] Ibid., pp. 80–4. [85] Ibid., pp. 83–4. [86] Ibid., pp. 93–113.

Jewish converts, until the destruction of Jerusalem,[87] as the model to other Christian Churches, in which the Apostles, unnamed but in plural number, play a continuing part. This is to divert attention from the journeyings of St Paul and the distant churches to which his Epistles are addressed, and other accounts (including Gibbon's[88]) present the community at Jerusalem as a somewhat eccentric body of Christians who were still Jews. Mosheim gives it a central role for two purposes: as a location for the beginnings of Judeo-gnostic heresy, and as occasion for his account of government in the primitive Church. He insists that this was composed of congregations, of which that at Jerusalem was only the first; and that all worship was conducted, and all decisions taken, by the body of the faithful – significantly called the *populus*[89] – even under the presidency, and with the guidance, of unnamed apostles and their successors, who would do nothing without the consent of the congregation. This is Mosheim's starting point – a little too distant from the apostolic succession for his subsequent editors[90] – from which he will develop a history of hierarchisation, leading through presbyters and bishops to patriarchs, popes and the growth of a clergy, separated from the laity by its claims to priestly authority and by the learning that makes it a clerisy as well as a clergy. The origins of authority and learning will have to be studied together.

With the fall of Jerusalem, persecution ceases to be Jewish- and becomes Roman-inspired: the paradox of a tolerant state persecuting a religion which denies all the gods on whose worship civil order in a polytheist empire seems to rest. Emperors and provincial governors – Trajan and Pliny – avoid general persecutions; Mosheim doubts the traditional listing of ten;[91] but magistrates still nominally answerable to the *populus Romanus* are forced into action by angry crowds, defending their gods under the leadership of priests, soothsayers and the artificers of cultic worship.[92] Mosheim insists on the compatibility of Christ's gospel with civil order;[93] but if the Christians proclaim Christ as the only god,[94] they must sooner or later demand that the empire rest on his worship alone. The gods were

[87] Ibid., p. 97, for this catastrophe; how the Christians survived the Zealots and the Romans is left unexplained.

[88] Below, pp. 252–4.

[89] The term appears at the outset of this section; *De Rebus*, pp. 112–13; cf. *Institutiones*, p. 44.

[90] The 1826 edition of Maclaine's translation contains (VI, pp. 41–95) what the then editor (Charles Coote, LL D) described as 'a judicious essay, the offspring of the spontaneous zeal of a distinguished divine of the Episcopal Church of Scotland' – named on the title page as Dr George Gleig of Stirling – arguing that the Apostles exercised in the primitive congregations an office to which there has been succession.

[91] *De Rebus*, pp. 97–101. [92] Ibid., pp. 103–4; *Institutiones*, p. 34; Maclaine, 1826, I, p. 66.

[93] *Institutiones*, pp. 33–4; Maclaine, 1826, I, p. 65. [94] *De Rebus*, pp. 101–2.

the gods of civil society; to deny them seemed a denial of the *divina natura et providentia*.[95] Like other historians we study in relation to Gibbon, he sees persecution less as prompted by the devil (whom he does not seem to mention) than as a paradox, an irony, and perhaps a tragedy, at a post-Judaic moment in the history of civil society, a point at which Christ bears not peace but a sword. He knows that the impious can exploit this.

(v) the growth of a clergy; persecution by the good emperors

From this point Mosheim must follow two distinct but interdependent themes. There is the emergence of a hierarchy, in which *episcopi* claim to exercise over the congregations an authority no longer derived from them. He gives numerous causes for this development, many of them contingent and circumstantial; but the authority that a ministry now claims over a laity comes to be based, first on a charismatic and spiritual character attributed to their office, second on the learning, both divine and human, which makes them a clerisy and the laity a profane vulgar. There will now be a double differentiation of the Church into two orders, which Mosheim knows to be problematical. From an all-conquering Word preached by apostles who do not need to be literate, we move to an order in which

> omnis ecclesia constabat ex doctoribus, qui etiam ex prescripto legum rem publicam gubernabant, ex ministris utriusque sexus, et ex populo.[96]
>
> [every church consisted of its teachers, who also governed the community by the letter of the law, its ministers of either sex,[97] and its people.]

This is a problem for historians. By what laws did this clergy rule, and how did their authority arise?

> Primum igitur in dividendis ecclesiis consulto *Clericorum et Laicorum* vocabula seposui, non quo vitii aliquid in illis esse putem, modo recte explicentur, sed ne suspicandi aliquid occasionem nonnullis praeberem. Non dissimulo tamen, ignorare me, quonam fructu difficiles illae et longae contentiones de harum appellationum antiquitate et origine susceptae sint. Ego quidem ad eorum accedo sententiam, qui perantiquas et ipsis paene Christianarum rerum initiis aequales eas esse putant: huic vero sententiae quaenam utilitas adiuncta sit, non video. Similiter non intelligo, quidnam commodi ex opinione sua capiant, qui saeculo tertio notas demum esse statuunt. De rebus et iuribus agitur, quando in veteris

[95] Ibid., p. 103. [96] Ibid., p. 140. [97] Ibid., pp. 137–40: 'diaconi et diaconissae'.

ecclesiae statum inquirimus, non de vocabulis: quae sive pro antiquissimis habeantur, sive recentius inventa putantur, naturam rerum minime mutant, quae aliunde, quam ex vocabulis, disci debet.[98]

[I have deliberately given first place, in the history of the growth of division in the churches, to the words *clergy* and *laity*, not because I see any impropriety in them, but so that I shall not give some readers grounds for suspicion. I will not conceal that I fail to see the point of the long and difficult debates that have gone on about the origin and antiquity of these denominations. I am myself in agreement with those who think them of the highest antiquity and almost coeval with the beginnings of Christian society, but I do not see what importance attaches to this point. Nor do I understand what value there is in the argument that they appear in the third century. When we enquire into the state of the Church in antiquity we are concerned with actual laws and practices, not with words; and to say that they were ancient uses or recent inventions makes no difference, since their character does not depend on the names they were known by.]

Mosheim is on dangerous ground and is trying to look beyond language to history. He wants to reconcile an original differentiation of authority, perhaps apostolic, with an original equality in which nothing was done without consent of the congregation, and no one church enjoyed authority over any other. It is easier to argue this of a time when all Christians were more or less unlearned, and any learned were equal with their brethren; but after the deaths of the Apostles there was need to commit their teachings to writing, and it became a question by what authority the Apostolic Fathers did this. Mosheim does not follow Le Clerc into debating their language and their command of it, or asking when and by whom the accepted Gospels were written, but both before and after the dissolution of the *ecclesia Hierosolymitana* at the Roman conquest, he faces the problem of writings which cannot be reconciled with them. The phenomenon of gnosticism arises at a very early date.

The primitive Church, he insists, still primarily that at Jerusalem, was culturally mixed; its converts, both Jewish and Gentile (*deorum cultores*), had not cast off all their previous beliefs and were uncertain what ritual practices they should abandon.[99] This was an environment in which 'oriental' beliefs – which we remember had infected Jewish religion since the Captivity – could easily flourish. Mosheim is able to cite the earlier works of Hammond and Le Clerc[100] and concur with both that the false teachers mentioned by St Paul were gnostics in some sense, and that some at least of them were of Jewish origin. He reviews the Clementine literature

[98] Ibid., p. 141. [99] Ibid., p. 168. [100] Ibid., p. 179.

portraying a Simon who may have been Simon Magus, and begins to explore the question of how far the gnosticism attributed to him and others may have been in part Platonic as well as Zoroastrian. He is clear that the Platonic Demiurge was not the fallen or evil creator of the gnostic systems, and though references to Isaac de Beausobre begin to appear in his text,[101] he seems to avoid endorsing Beausobre's general thesis of the inability of all ancient philosophy to accept the creation of matter. Mosheim is laying the ground[102] for a departure from gnosticism, leaving it as a side-issue, and a portrait of Alexandrian neo-Platonism as a less fantastic but far more dangerous threat to Christianity when the latter becomes increasingly dominated by the controversy with Hellenist philosophy. This is to come later; meanwhile, the thesis that early gnosticism was in part Jewish enables him to conclude the first century in both his histories with a portrait of the heretic Cerinthus. The image of Jehovah as fallen creator leads to that of Christ as an aeon descending upon Jesus and leaving him at the Crucifixion; but Cerinthus teaches that the two will be rejoined and reign on earth for a thousand years before the end of days.[103] The Apostle John, concluding his long life in Ephesus, may – though this is disputed – have written to confute this blend of gnosticism and millenarianism, but while this is briefly considered in the *De Rebus*,[104] the later *Institutiones* conclude the first century without treating the Fourth Gospel or the death of John as the historical climax of the apostolic period.[105] The contrast with Le Clerc is evident and striking. Mosheim is writing a more critically constructed history, for which Le Clerc had laid some but not all of the foundations.

More striking still, it is hard to see Mosheim, at this point, turning with Le Clerc from the direct action of the Spirit to the unseen hand of Providence.[106] The study of causes and conditions seems to proceed without mention of the latter. As in both works he advances into the second century after Christ, Mosheim is increasingly concerned to weave together the various themes and narratives that have emerged. There is a rapid spread of Christianity to be narrated, if at the same time estimated,[107] and since the Apostles with their pentecostal powers have departed, there is a need to consider its causes and weigh the sacred against the secular. It is important, however, to see precisely what this means. The secular causes listed consist of the merely human endeavours of second-century Christians, in such

[101] E.g., ibid., pp. 30, 62, 73, 186. [102] Ibid., pp. 183–84.
[103] Ibid., pp. 196–202; *Institutiones*, pp. 66–7; Maclaine, 1826, I, pp. 129–30.
[104] *De Rebus*, pp. 197–8. [105] *Institutiones*, pp. 66–7. [106] Above, pp. 131–2.
[107] *De Rebus*, pp. 203–5; *Institutiones*, p. 70; Maclaine, 1826, I, pp. 135–6.

activities as translating their scriptures into the many languages of the empire and – where necessary though dangerous – providing commentaries upon them. We are moving away from the Word as a culture of the illiterate; the *doctores* must be *docti* and become a *clerus*. This is a change in historical circumstance which will have very mixed results;[108] the *humanae causae*, however, consist in the actions performed by Christians, not in the changing cultural circumstances suggested by Gibbon, capable of either a providential or a secular explanation. It is clear from the writers of this age, continues Mosheim, that the spread of so challenging and unfamiliar a religion could not have been achieved by human speech and writing alone;[109] the performance of miracles, by the successors of the Apostles, must have continued for some time. Here Mosheim is in the predicament now familiar; miracles must have continued, yet – for a Protestant – they must have progressively disappeared. He inserts a lengthy note on the notorious work of Conyers Middleton and situates it in the context of Christian learning. Middleton was right to engage in critical enquiry into the persistence and cessation of miracles after the Apostles, wrong only to use language which might challenge their presence in apostolic times; in work posthumously published, he made it clear that he had not intended the latter.[110] What is at issue, in Mosheim's understanding, is less the persistence or decline of miraculous powers than the decline of the inspired simplicity of the illiterate Apostles and their congregations, now replaced by a vulnerability to the sophistications of the learned. In the older accounts, this was why John had lived long enough to acquire philosophic capacity and write his Gospel, but Mosheim does not use this resource. The spread of Christianity[111] made it vulnerable to philosophers and persecutors.

The second Christian century coincided with that age of stabilised succession to the Roman principate, which historians from Pedro Mexia[112] to Gibbon judged the happiest period in the history known to them. Yet under these 'good emperors', from Trajan to Marcus Aurelius, persecution of the Christians continued and perhaps increased; Justin Martyr perished under the first Antoninus, and it had been computed that there were more martyrs in the reign of Marcus Aurelius than in any other so far. It was a problem for Mosheim to explain why there were

> sub optimis et mitissimis Imperatoribus variis in locis et provinciis gravissimae calamitates sustinendae,

[108] *Institutiones*, p. 72; Maclaine, 1826, I, p. 140. [109] *Institutiones*, p. 70; Maclaine, 1826, I, p. 137.
[110] *De Rebus*, pp. 221–3. [111] Ibid., pp. 223–9. [112] FDF, pp. 244–5.

and to the usual culprits he added the part played by

Philosophorum denique et Rhetorum nonnulli confutationibus et declarationibus.[113]

[so many heavy calamities sustained in many towns and provinces under the best and most humane of the emperors . . . (furthered by) the refutations and declamations of not a few philosophers and rhetoricians.]

Tillemont the Jansenist had expressly declared that the intellectual and moral pride of the heathen philosophers had led them to persecute a religion that rose above human virtue. Mosheim here provides a lengthy note on Marcus Aurelius which to a modern historian may seem perhaps the most remarkable thing he wrote.

Dubitavi dudum, tantus num fuerit MARCUS, quantus esse plerisque omnibus et olim visus est et hodie videtur. Ex scriptis, quae restant, si aestimetur, quantivis videtur esse pretii; actiones vero si ad rationis normam exigantur, haud leviter faciem mutat. Bonum virum fuisse, valde licet superstitiosum, dubitare nolo: boni vero imperatoris et principis nomen an mereatur, dubio. Sed mittam hoc et quaeram tantum paucis, quare sub Imperatore philosopho, nec hebetis ingenii, deterior Christianorum conditio fuerit, quam sub Imperatoribus antecedentibus philosophiae cognitione destitutis . . . Veri longe similius est, immoderatam eius lenitatem, quae propius aberat ab incuria et inertia, atque ex Stoica illa mentis constantia et serenitate, quam *Apathia* nominant, oriebatur, effecisse, ut malos homines quae vellent facere pateretur et facinora etiam tranquilla mente spectaret . . . Proxime autem ad verum accedere putem, qui suspicantur, philosophos, a quibus obsidebatur, quique Christianos odio habebant, pravam animo eius opinionem de CHRISTI cultoribus iniecisse, hominemque natura credulum et flexibilem induxisse, ut sectam in Christianis natam esse crederet vanam, amentem, turbulantem, vitiosam, nec quae coerceretur, propterea indignam[114] . . . Numquam ipse MARCUS mori Christianos viderat: quaecumque igitur de illis tradit, ea sine dubio ex philosophorum et iudicum narrationes acceperat, qui Christianos ei tales depinxerant, quales haberi ab ipso cupiebant.

[I have for some time wondered whether Marcus was as great a man as almost everyone thought him and still does. If you judge him by his writings that survive, he seems of the highest value; but if you judge his actions by the rule of reason, your estimate will change considerably. I do not doubt that he was a good man, though somewhat superstitious; but I do doubt whether he deserves to be thought a good emperor and prince. But I will set that aside and briefly enquire how it was that under an emperor who was a philosopher and of no mean intelligence, the lot of the Christians was worse than it had been under the previous emperors, who knew

[113] *De Rebus*, p. 231.

[114] Here Mosheim cites the *Meditations* ('de rebus ad se pertinentibus') XI, 3; the only passage where Christians may be mentioned by name.

nothing of philosophy . . . It seems most likely that the unlimited tolerance, not far from indifference and inertia, which arose from the Stoic constancy and serenity of mind that they call *apatheia*, brought it about that he would suffer bad men to do as they liked, and observe their crimes with a tranquil conscience . . . I think it is also near the truth to suspect that the philosophers by whom he was beset, and who hated the Christians, filled his mind with prejudice against the worshippers of Christ, and induced a man naturally credulous and persuadable to believe that sect vainglorious, unstable, turbulent, vicious, and deserving of repression . . . Marcus had never seen Christians die, and so he believed unhesitatingly everything told him about them by philosophers and magistrates, who portrayed them as they wanted him to think them.]

He continues, quoting a further passage from the emperor's writings:

Comparat hoc enuntiato Imperator Stoicam in obeunda morte fortitudinem cum Christiana constantia: laudat illam: contemnit hanc. Philosophus primum deliberato animo, ratione duce ac comite, ad mortem proficiscitur, id est, tranquillus moritur, quia novit, nihil sibi mali per mortem evenire posse: Secus Christianus, si MARCUM audias: is sine ratione moritur, neque aliam fortitudinis suae caussam, quam mentis quamdam obstinationem et pertinaciam ratione ac iudicio vacuam . . . Fefellerant MARCUM turpiter, qui hac cum opinione de Christianis imbuerant: graviores enim et longe maiores habebant illi caussas mortem sperendi, quam omnes Stoici . . . At nihil mirum erat Imperatorem sic institutum existimare, utile reipublicae fore, homines eius generis extirpare . . . Sed pergamus in iudicio Imperatoris. Philosophus constanter et graviter sine tragico apparatu mortem oppetit: Id est, nisi me fallunt omnia: Non, quod solent illi, qui in Tragoediis moriuntur, in vitae exitu declamat, et tumida fucataque oratione spectatorum animos ciere et commovere studet, verum magno animo silens et quietus satis obtemperat. Secus Christianus, ut MARCUS ait: is gravitate neglecta, Tragicas mortes imitatur, quumque moriendum est, pluribus verbis suam hilaritatem, spem, fiduciam, vitaeque contemtum declarat . . . Haec vehementer displicere debebant homini Stoico, qui sapientem eumdem semper vultum, eumdem frontem exhibere debere praecipiebat, qui vitiosos ducebat omnes animi motus, qui denique in omni vitae actu et casu summam aequabilitatem servari volebat. Igitur Tragice Christianos mori, non Philosophice censebat: Hinc etiam malis, quibus afficiebantur, parum movebatur, immo ex praescripto sectae, cui parebat, moveri nullo modo debebat.[115]

[Here the emperor compares the courage of the Stoic facing death with the resolution of the Christian; he praises the one and condemns the other. The philosopher goes to his death deliberately, with reason as his leader and companion; he dies composedly because he knows that death can do him no harm. Not so the Christian, if you believe Marcus; he dies unreasoningly, without any support for his courage

[115] *De Rebus*, pp. 244–6. Mosheim seems to be paraphrasing and embellishing the text of *Meditations* XI.3 as translated into Latin by Thomas Gataker (London, 1697). My thanks to Michael Silverthorne and James Moore for this identification.

but obstinacy of mind and a stubborness void of reason and judgement . . . Marcus was grossly deceived by those who taught him to think thus of the Christians; they had weightier and far stronger reasons for their contempt of death than any Stoic . . . It is not to be wondered at that an emperor so indoctrinated should think it better for the commonwealth that such people should be eradicated . . . Let us proceed with the emperor's judgement. 'The philosopher confronts death soberly and gravely (unless I am altogether deceived) and without any theatricality. He does not, like those who die like performers in a tragedy, make speeches as he leaves this life, or try to stir up and enlist the sympathies of the spectators with turgid and bombastic eloquence, but submits in silence and the repose of a strong mind. Not so the Christian', says Marcus; 'he throws off all restraint and imitates the deaths of stage players, proclaiming with many words, as he comes to die, his joy, hope, trust, and contempt of death' . . . Such behaviour must have deeply offended a Stoic, who taught that a wise man would always keep the same countenance and demeanour; who thought all emotion vicious; who aimed to maintain the same equability in every action and every accident of life. So he thought the Christians met death theatrically rather than philosophically, and their sufferings moved him very little; of course, according to the teachings of his school they should not have moved him at all.][116]

Mosheim's imagination is working independently of the conventions of historiography; he is using it to enter into the workings of a mind historically distant from his. The narrative he now resumes moves on from this point.

(vi) oriental philosophy and the threat from neo-platonism

The emperor's philosophy is that of a Roman Stoic, directed towards morals rather than metaphysics. Both Mosheim and Gibbon preferred it on these grounds to Greek and eastern speculation about God and the origin of matter; but Mosheim is clear that it was precisely this emphasis that made the philosopher-emperor a party to persecution. He goes on to the next stage in the history of Hellenist metaphysics, in which philosophy threatened Christian belief in quite another way than persecution could. From now on gnosticism, with its radical doubts about the creator and its occultist manufacture of aeons and daemons, will be sidelined on a path leading to Manichaeism, while Christian theology confronts a liberal syncretism that offers to absorb it.

[116] The use of quotation marks conveys Mosheim's apparent intention of making the emperor the author of these words.

This danger, significantly, coincides with a rise in the level of clerical authority. As the number of churches increases, so does the number of their common concerns – persecution and doctrinal dispute among them – about which they must share information and agree upon decisions. Councils appear and must have officers to preside over them; churches in great cities – Rome, Alexandria, Antioch – or with claims to apostolic foundation, exercise over others an authority that may become formalised.[117] At first, all these forms of authority are accepted by general consent; but the office of bishop is exercised at an increasing distance from the congregation, and metropolitans and patriarchs[118] appear who derive their office from the episcopal order and its supposed apostolic origins. The government of the Church is moving in the direction of aristocracy. This is happening for natural and morally neutral reasons; it is the effect of numbers, size and distance; but not all the activities in which a growing clerical elite expands by taking part are necessary to the Christian life. One of these is philosophy. Mosheim, like other historians, takes it for granted that the Hellenised culture to which the Mission to the Gentiles was directed was one in which philosophers were ubiquitous, conspicuous and inescapable. Their beards and cloaks gave them a prestige which presbyters were anxious to share and even acquire,[119] and their monopoly of discourse furnished a context in which the Christian gospel must be propounded and interpreted. Many of them were hostile to it and set forth a metaphysics opposed to that which they said it entailed; but the friendship of philosophers was as dangerous as their enmity, since they embraced the gospel but assimilated it, restating it as philosophic discourse. Mosheim was anything but the first to say this; he made it the next chapter of his history.

He turned to the *Platonici recentiores*, about whom he had already written but on whom his position had changed somewhat as he pursued his critical translation of Cudworth. In both the *De Rebus* and the *Institutiones*, he devoted considerable space to the school of eclectic and synthetic philosophy founded at Alexandria by the master Ammonius Sacca, of whom much had been written though he had left no writings behind him. This school was that of the 'modern Platonists' who appear at the end of Gibbon's thirteenth chapter, but it was agreed that they were eclectics who had borrowed from other philosophies and modified Plato's teachings by doing so; and it was debated how far Plato was responsible for the direction they took and Christians found dangerous. In writing about them,

[117] *De Rebus*, pp. 258, 269–70. [118] Ibid., p. 270.
[119] *Institutiones*, p. 77; Maclaine, 1826, I, p. 151.

Mosheim looked back in history to a general thesis about ancient philosophy, not unlike Beausobre's but indebted to other scholars, in particular his contemporary Jakob Brucker, the giant of the early modern history of philosophy. Beausobre had been acquainted only with his earlier work,[120] but his *Historia Critica Philosophiae* had appeared between 1742 and 1744, in six volumes averaging 1,000 pages each, written in a Latin dense even for its period. Gibbon owned the edition of 1767.[121]

A central theme for Brucker was the need to distinguish between the history of philosophers (as told by Diogenes Laertius or Thomas Stanley) and the history of their doctrines. His work was 'critical' in a double sense: he could criticise doctrines philosophically, and he could situate them in their historical contexts, regional and periodical, sacred and profane, reviewing the philosophers of many cultures and asking how the meaning of the term 'philosophy' altered as we moved from one to another.[122] Those we termed 'philosophers' in post-diluvial antiquity, he said, were often misdescribed as such; among the Hebrews they had been prophets and lawgivers, while among the Gentiles their doctrine had been cosmogony rather than philosophy, until the Greeks laid down principles of truth-seeking that made their thought deserving of the name. The sages of Gentile antiquity, distressed by the multiplicity, immorality and superstition of the myths and cults of a world lapsed into polytheism, had resolved to regard all of them as imagined fragments of a higher truth; and since the cults of the peoples were directed at gods of many kinds, this higher knowledge was that of a God beyond, behind and above all lesser deities. As Gibbon observed in his chapter on the Persians,[123] this God was an intellectual construct, possibly not an active (and certainly not a revealed) principle or person; ancient philosophy had been a metaphysics, an attempt by the intellect to state how the cosmos had come into being, and thus, said Brucker, a cosmogony.

It was a question, especially for Christians, to what ultimate godhead or principle ancient philosophy could lead back, and to this there were a number of answers. The problem of matter and creation explored by Beausobre became relevant here, and it was possible to arrive at the radical dualism of some Zoroastrians, or at the no less radical monism of many others: at the silent and unmoving *bythos* before all creation, a principle of non-being before all being, an unbounded time before all time.[124] If the eternity of matter remained unquestioned, the ultimate principle might be

[120] Above, p. 141 n. 17. [121] *Library*, p. 80.
[122] For Brucker see, at large, Santinello, 1979–81, II; Kelley, 2002; Catana, 2008.
[123] BSE, p. 32. [124] Ibid., p. 50.

one in which matter and spirit were united and indistinguishable; though this and other positions were generally considered atheist, on the grounds that *bythos* had never become *logos* or *theos*, the impersonal never becoming personal. Ralph Cudworth, whose study of atheism was respected by both Brucker and Mosheim – despite his Platonism and his unfortunate habit of writing in seventeenth-century English – had distinguished the atheism that denied creation from the radical materialism attributed to Heraclitus, Epicurus and Hobbes, in which the universe consisted merely of atoms falling through space for ever. The latter was the greater danger philosophically, but the former perhaps the greater in early modern history.

From the God – if that were the right word – who never stooped to creation, there might emanate lesser gods who did: the imperfect, fallen or actively malignant creators found in various systems, among whom Plato's Demiurgus must be carefully distinguished from many others. There might also emerge chains of *aeones* or *daimones* linking the uncreated with the creation and perhaps accounting for the latter's descent into imperfection or downright evil. This theogony helped to account for the early Christians' belief that the pagan gods were not fictions or fantasies, but actual and malignant demons; its reversal by some Platonist Christians was a source of Christian angelology as well as demonology, but the former was vehemently condemned by Protestants as increasing that multitude of intercessors before God that made Catholicism a religion of superstition. All this was the fruit of philosophy, and this was the context in which the God of the Old and New Dispensations was to be explained as a problem in philosophy and the history of philosophy.

This plethora of possibilities – of which some emerge as heresies within the Christian confession, others as philosophies more or less opposed to it – was the result of a strategy of syncretism; all cults were represented as versions or distortions of a single transcendent truth, which only a philosopher could grasp. The illuminati thus played what an Enlightenment critic would recognise as a double role. Outwardly and in public, they were priests, benignly manipulating the superstitions of the vulgar; inwardly and in private, they were enthusiasts, believing themselves possessed by the knowledge – it was certainly a *gnōsis* – which was the stuff of the universe. The Ionian Greeks, though philosophers, did not break with this in full; the decisive step was taken by Socrates, an Enlightened figure who abandoned the study of nature and God, to devote himself to the pursuit of social morality, and the discovery of immortality if not of resurrection. At his death, however, the most brilliant of his disciples betrayed his teaching,

travelling among philosopher-priests in Egypt and Pythagoreans in Italy to become the exponent of the cosmology of the *Timaeus*. Brucker preferred Xenophon's account of Socrates to Plato's,[125] and had much to say about the latter's deviations into 'enthusiasm', the belief that knowledge was a union with the divine.[126]

This conviction, adopted and adulterated by eclecticism, became in Alexandrian Platonism the source of a new syncretic programme. Where the original sages had sought to make all the cults of polytheism outward signs of an inner unity known to philosophers, Ammonius Sacca and his followers offered to reduce all philosophies to versions of the same inner truth, and endeavoured to convert the Christian gospel – already half restated as a *gnōsis* – into one of the philosophies to be so unified. It was disputed among the learned – Fabricius, Lardner and Mosheim[127] – whether Ammonius was a lapsed Christian or a philosopher who had set out to absorb Christianity into his synthesis. Mosheim's views changed on this question, but not on the thrust of Alexandrian doctrine.

His persuasum erat, veram philosophiam, magnum Dei et saluberrimum munus, per omnes philosophorum sectas membratim dissipatam esse; sapientis igitur, et Christiani potissimum doctoris officium esse, ex omnibus eam angulis colligere atque ad firmandam religionem, profligandamque impietatem adhibere . . . [Ammonius] concordiam omnium sectarum philosophicarum et religionum moliebatur seu philosophiam tradere audiebat, per quam et omnes inter se philosophi et omnes religiones, Christiana haud excepta, sociarentur et coniungerentur. In quo potissimum differentia novae huius sectae et Eclecticae, quae antea in Aegypto florueret, philosophiae consistit. *Eclectici* enim omnibus in disciplinis mala bonis, vera falsis admista esse sciscebant, et ex omnibus idcirco quae rationi consentanea videbantur sua faciebant, reiectis reliquis quae a veritate ex eorum sententia dissentiebant. AMMONIUS vero, si modum tradendi demas et minutas quasdam opiniones, omnes sectas unam eamdemque veritatem profiteri, statuebat, et interpretatione propterea adhibita, mediocri labore ad unam familiam revocare posse. Id praeterea novum et singulare in eo erat, quod populares etiam religiones, immo ipsam Christianam, ex communi hac omnium sectorum intelligi et explicari, plebisque ac sacerdotum fabulas, discipulorum CHRISTI interpretationes separari ab illis debere, contendebat.[128]

These sages were of opinion that *true philosophy*, the greatest and most salutary gift of God to mortals, was scattered in various portions through all the different sects; and that it was, consequently, the duty of every wise man, and more especially of every Christian doctor, to gather it from the several corners where it lay dispersed, and to employ it, thus reunited, in the defence of religion, and

[125] Brucker, 1742–4, I, pp. 556, 569. [126] Ibid., I, pp. 659–69, esp. p. 664.
[127] Maclaine, 1826, I, pp. 152–3. [128] *Institutiones*, pp. 77–8.

in destroying the dominion of impiety and vice[129] . . . (Ammonius) attempted a general reconciliation or coalition of all sects, whether philosophical or religious, and taught a doctrine, which he looked upon as proper to them all, the Christians not excepted, in the most perfect harmony. And herein lies the difference between this new sect and the Eclectics, who had, before this time, flourished in Egypt. The Eclectics held, that, in every sect, there was a mixture of good and bad, of truth and falsehood; and, accordingly, they chose and adopted, out of each of them, such tenets as seemed to them comfortable to reason and truth, and rejected such as they thought repugnant to both. Ammonius, on the contrary, maintained, that the great principles of all philosophical and religious truth were to be found equally in all sects; that they differed from each other only in their method of expressing them, and in some opinions of little or no importance; and that, by a proper interpretation of their respective sentiments, they might easily be united into one body. It is further to be observed, that the propensity of Ammonius to singularity and paradox, led him to maintain, that all the Gentile religions, and even the Christian, were to be illustrated and explained by the principles of this universal philosophy; but that, in order to this, the fables of the priests were to be removed from Paganism, and the comments and interpretations of the disciples of Jesus from Christianity.[130]

Joseph Priestley and Thomas Jefferson, the most anti-Platonist of philosophers, were to have similar plans for an expurgated Christianity; but in their case the truths common to all religions amounted to a deliberately simplified unitarianism, and here we have to do with some transcendent *gnōsis* of ultimate reality. Ammonius is said to have supplied this philosophy – if it deserves a name otherwise reserved for the Greek – with an origin and a history.

Quo melius autem et facilius arduum negotium procederet, sumebat Philosophiam inter populos Orientis natam et educatam, ab HERMETE apud Aegyptios traditam, hinc ad Graecos delatam, Graecorum quidem disputationibus paullulum obscuratam et deformatam esse et a PLATONE tamen, optimo HERMETIS et veterum Orientis sapientium interprete, integram potissimum et puram servatam esse. Ab haec antiquissima philosophia non abhorrere religiones apud orbis terrarum populos receptos: et malo fato contigisse, ut quae veteres per symbola fictasque Historias more Orientis tradiderant, proprie a populis et sacerdotibus intelligerentur, et divinae idcirco providentiae ministri, daemones nimirum, variis huius mundi partibus a supremo rerum Domino praepositi, male in Deos converterentur, multisque varis caeremoniis coherentur: Publicas igitur populorum religiones ad veterem philosophiam revocandas esse: Atque hoc unum CHRISTO propositum fuisse, ut superstitioni dominanti modum poneret et invectos in religionem errores corrigeret, non vero, ut veteres religiones prorsus aboleret.[131]

[129] Maclaine, 1826, I, pp. 151–2. [130] Ibid., pp. 153–4. [131] *Institutiones*, pp. 78–9.

In order to the accomplishment of his purpose, he supposed, that true philosophy derived its origin and its consistence from the eastern nations; that it was taught to the eastern nations by Hermes; that it was brought from them to the Greeks, by whose (vain subtleties and litigious) disputes, it was rendered somewhat obscure and deformed; but was, however, preserved in its original purity by Plato, who was the best interpreter of Hermes, and of the other oriental sages. He maintained, that all the different religions which prevailed in the world were (in their original integrity) conformable to (the genius of) this ancient philosophy; but that it unfortunately happened, that the symbols and fictions, under which, according to the eastern manner, the ancients (delivered their precepts and their doctrines), were (in process of time, erroneously understood) both by priests and people in a literal sense; that, in consequence of this, the (invisible) beings and demons, whom the Supreme Deity had placed in the different parts of the universe as the ministers of his providence, were (by the suggestions of superstition) converted into gods, and worshiped with a multiplicity of vain ceremonies. He therefore insisted, that the religions of all nations should be (restored to their original purity, and) reduced to their primitive standard (n. viz. The ancient philosophy of the east); and he affirmed that this his project (was agreeable to the intentions of) Jesus Christ, whose sole view (in descending upon earth) was, to set bounds to the reigning superstition, and to remove the errors that had crept into all religions, but not to abolish the ancient (theology from which they were derived).[132]

The various gnosticisms were given a directly Persian origin, but here the source of neo-Platonism is placed in an orientalised Egypt, and Plato himself takes on an oriental and hermetic character; Hermes here need not be the Trismegistus unmasked by Casaubon. The cultic religions are mythologised versions of an increasingly esoteric philosophy, and the supreme deity is active enough to exercise providence in distributing *daimones* as the ministers of his purpose. Superstition converts these into gods, but they do not have the malignity attributed to them by the Christians. Christ himself plays a role not unlike that he assumes in the gnostic systems; but he comes only to reform the cults, not to abolish them. This to a Christian must appear a denial of his character as Son of God, Redeemer coequal with his Creator; but the history of this perception – if it had not been revealed by him at the beginning – must be traced by reviewing that of the Platonic Trinity and asking whether the Logos there described could be made Flesh. But Christ's diminished role in Alexandrian thinking was a consequence of neo-Platonic syncretism; we are looking at the liberal offer to reconcile all things by reducing their specificity.

[132] Maclaine, 1826, I, pp. 78–9. The words bracketed are Maclaine's embellishments of Mosheim's Latin. Whether 'veteres religiones' should be translated as 'the ancient theology' seems doubtful.

CHRISTUM deinde egregium virum, Deoque amicum, admirabilem etiam *Theurgum* fuisse fatebatur. Negabat autem, CHRISTUM daemonum et divinae providentiae administratorum cultum prorsus tollere, voluisse: Contra eum veterum religionum maculas tantum abstergere studuisse, sectatores autem eius magistri disciplinam corrupisse et vitiasse, perhibebat.[133]

He (Ammonius) acknowledged Christ to be a most excellent man, the friend of God, the admirable *theurge*; he denied, however, that Jesus intended to abolish entirely the worship of demons and the other ministers of divine Providence; and affirmed, on the contrary, that his only intention was to purify the ancient religion, and that his followers had manifestly corrupted the doctrine of their (divine) master.[134]

The Christians are to be deprived of Christ as they see him; but it is possible for a neo-Platonist philosopher to see the Christ of the Gospels as affirming the character that is to be denied him. The emperor Julian – a central figure in Gibbon's second volume – who appears in the *De Rebus* as asserting the inner unity of all philosophies,[135] is named as one who has come to reject Christ altogether, while others prefer to assimilate him.

Non diffiteor, inter eos, qui ab AMMONIO disciplinam acceperant, fuisse quosdam CHRISTO aeque inimicos, atque Christianis: illustre habemus in IULIANO Imperatore, aliisque aetatis eius Platonicis exemplum. His cur odio CHRISTUM habeant, peculiares erant rationes, quas rerum veterum periti haud difficulter perspicient.[136]

[I do not deny that there were those among the disciples of Ammonius who were enemies of Christ no less than of the Christians. We have a signal example in the emperor Julian and other Platonists of his time. These had reasons of their own for hating Christ, easily understood by those who are skilled in antiquities.]

And a few pages later, Mosheim mentions those Platonists in the third and fourth centuries who set up Apollonius of Tyana and Pythagoras himself as figures rivalling Christ.[137] This was to make Jesus a philosopher and thaumaturge, one of several who had sought to refine superstition, but only if he claimed to be more was it necessary to revile him. If this could be laid at the door of his disciples, he might be praised among the others.

Decebat hominem, qui omnes omnino sectas et religiones sociare volebat, CHRISTUMque veram tantum et antiquissimam humani generis philosophiam et religionem instaurasse, decebat, honorifice de CHRISTO et sentire et loqui.[138]

[It was proper for a man whose sole aim was to make all schools and religions allies, and taught that Christ had come to restore the true philosophy and most ancient religion of humanity, to think and speak of him with veneration.]

[133] *Institutiones*, p. 80; cf. *De Rebus*, pp. 293 ff. [134] Maclaine, I, pp. 156–7.
[135] *De Rebus*, p. 284. [136] Ibid., p. 295. [137] Ibid., p. 298. [138] Ibid., p. 294.

There might remain the Christ who had brought not peace but a sword, an amazing grace contrary to a fallen nature. It is a question, however, how much Mosheim and Brucker have to say of him.

(VII) THE CHURCH CORRUPTED BY THE ENCOUNTER WITH PHILOSOPHY

The neo-Platonist programme threatened the uniqueness of Christ, and did not remove the danger of persecution. Christians would reject the offer of absorption into a mishmash of philosophies, and find themselves proceeded against for the intolerance and atheism of denying other people's gods. One did not have to be a sceptical or Enlightened historian to understand how this would happen; Tillemont, Mosheim, Warburton,[139] as well as Gibbon, all understood it very well. But philosophy posed other threats than those presented by the well-intentioned proposals of Ammonius; the danger of corruption was as acute as that of persecution. It arose differently: from the cultural as well as intellectual supremacy of philosophy. Mosheim proceeds to recount what followed when Christians felt obliged to state their creed in philosophic terms – though it was becoming axiomatic that the proposition that the Word had become Flesh was one to which philosophy was never quite equal. It is the prestige of philosophy that he chooses to emphasise, above even the need to answer the philosophers' arguments.

Ita philosophandi libido postquam animis doctorum Aegyptiorum et quorumdam aliorum illapsa et gradatim ad alios traducta erat, sancta illo et pulchra primorum temporum simplicitas plane tollebatur, mirabilisque totius disciplinae conversio consequebatur: cuius quidem insignis mutationis hoc saeculo initia, sequente maxima incrementa videmus. Primum divinis libris per immoderatum philosophiae amorem vis afferebatur . . . philosophiae studio accensi illa etiam dogmata, quae ratione consentanea putabant, ex divinorum scriptorum libris eruere mirabili subtilitate studebant et quae philosophicis opinionibus suis adversariae cernebant oracula sacri codicis, miserrime pervertebant et detorquebant.[140]

[And so, after the hunger for philosophising had seized on the minds of Egyptian and other teachers of doctrine, the holy and beautiful simplicity of the earliest times altogether vanished, and there followed an amazing transformation of the Christian doctrine and discipline.[141] We may see the beginnings of this great change in the second century, and its greatest effects in that following. In the first place, the immoderate love of philosophy did violence to the holy scriptures . . . inflamed

[139] For Warburton's thesis that Christian monotheism transgressed the principle of 'intercommunity' among pagan religions, see further below, pp. 230–4.

[140] *De Rebus*, p. 298.

[141] Mosheim seems to use *disciplina* to indicate both doctrine and practice.

by philosophic zeal, men laboured with extraordinary subtlety to extract what dogmas they thought reasonable from the writings of the inspired authors; and if any revelations in the sacred text seemed contrary to philosophical doctrine, they twisted and misinterpreted them desperately.]

A note to this passage tells us it is aimed especially at Pantaenus the Eclectic and Clement of Alexandria, but that the Jewish philosopher Philo was the moving spirit behind them both. It is a significant pointer to Mosheim's real targets. We might expect him at this point to follow the path indicated by Hobbes and pursued by Jean Le Clerc and Arthur Bury, toward an indictment of the second-century Fathers for letting vain philosophy mislead them into unmeaning debates over the nature of Christ and the relation between Father and Son; but Mosheim does not address the Socinian–Trinitarian controversies opened up in the 1690s, though these were still going on. His concern is rather with the esoteric: that is, with intimations of the Platonic–Eclectic assertion that all philosophies and all myths were derived from a *vera philosophia* which, since it lay behind all, must be hidden from each. The problem was not new. William Warburton, a Leo Strauss of the eighteenth century,[142] had asserted that in most of the late antique philosophers, an overt statement of theism had concealed a probably Spinozistic message of secret atheism,[143] God disappearing, as he so easily could, into nature; and Mosheim had pointed out that Warburton was pushing his claim beyond the point where it could possibly be proved either true or false.[144] It was not that writers did not sometimes conceal their intentions, but that the division of every text into exoteric and esoteric meanings rendered it impossible to show that they had not. This is not Mosheim's chief concern in either the *De Rebus* or the *Institutiones*, where passages like that last quoted are aimed less immediately at the Platonisation of Christ's person than at the interpretation of the Gospels as allegories or outward expressions of an inner doctrine that reduced Christ's person to philosophy.

To make Christ the type or figure of a philosophic truth was to abandon the being in whom (say modern scholars) second- and third-century Christians were still striving to formulate their belief: the divine person who had been born had died, and (said the Christians) had risen again, in order to redeem human beings. The claim that he might be fully or adequately understood from the four Gospels underlies all that Mosheim,

[142] Young 1998b, pp. 175–6.

[143] For the allegation of a 'double doctrine', denying esoterically what had been avowed exoterically, see below, pp. 234–7.

[144] For Mosheim's criticisms of Warburton, see *De Rebus*, pp. 9, 18.

and Maclaine, have to say about the original simplicity of Christian practice. But the philosophy that the Alexandrians made him represent was indeterminate; it was in the nature of hermetic eclecticism that it might be stated in more than one way. It was certainly a *gnōsis* or knowledge of God – this was where it fell short of Christian worship – but need not be, and in the school of Ammonius was not, a gnosticism that declared the imperfection of the Creator. And the role assigned to Plato by Ammonius – and indeed Brucker – left his relation to the supposed teachings of the Egyptians open to question, as was the extent to which 'neo-Platonism' was an adequate description of the Alexandrian school. Here Mosheim was able to turn from Ammonius to the Jewish Platonist (perhaps a contemporary of Jesus) Philo, and join hands with the tradition of scholarship which gave heresy, from Pauline times, a Jewish as well as a Greco-oriental origin.

Observamus hic, quod operae pretium est, PHILONEM dogma suum de tribus in Deo potentiis, de quo tot extant eximiorum virorum coniecturae et opiniones, ad disciplinem arcani referre.

A note refers us to Mosheim's debate with Cudworth.

Quare, meo quidem iudicio, frustra omnis opera in detegenda et explicanda PHILONIS Trinitate, illaque sigillatim rei illius natura, quam λογον seu verbum appellat, consumetur . . . PHILO imitat Aegyptios: CLEMENS PHILONEM suum: CLEMENTEM et PHILONEM ORIGENES: hunc reliqui Christianorum doctores, sed non omnes tantum, sequuntur . . . Non dico ceterum a PHILONE hanc disciplinam inventam esse: novimus enim iam ante eum Iudaeos quosdam MOSEN ex PLATONE, aliisque Graecorum philosophis, interpretatos esse . . . Mirum dictu, quantum sibi auctoritatis inter Christianos Alexandrinus ille Iudaeus peperit: ut in veterum doctorum, quos *Patres* nominamus, scriptis multa saepe sine PHILONE intelligi nequeant.[145]

[Let us note here, as worth attention, that Philo drew his doctrine of three powers in God, about which there have been so many theories and debates among the learned, from the arcane teaching . . . Therefore it is in vain – so I at least believe – to spend time labouring to explain and interpret Philo's trinity, and in particular what he meant by that which he calls the Logos or Word . . . Philo imitates the Egyptians, Clement his master Philo, Origen both Clement and Philo; and many though not all Christian doctors here follow the last mentioned . . . I do not say that Philo invented this doctrine; we know that certain Jews before him interpreted Moses in terms of Plato and other Greek philosophers . . . It is amazing how much authority among Christians was acquired by this Alexandrian Jew; there is much in the writings of the ancient doctors we call the Fathers that cannot be understood without him.]

[145] Ibid., pp. 309–10.

This is a complicated and perhaps confused passage. The corruption of Second Temple religion by Greek philosophy becomes the corruption of Plato (probably in his lifetime) by Egyptian arcanism; the Platonic trinity, found in the *Timaeus*, is derived from hermetic interpretation. Mosheim seems to be dismissing, as an Alexandrian and cosmopolitan corruption of Christian belief, the entire debate as to whether the Christian Trinity was indebted to Platonism or transcended it, and he does not here tell us what he thought true doctrine about the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, or how it might be arrived at. The quoted passage does not in fact point that way; it is part of an indictment of the Christian adoption of neo-Platonist esotericism in the interpretation of their own scriptures and beliefs. The mention of Philo locates this in possibly Pauline times, long before Ammonius; but Mosheim has selected neo-Platonism rather than gnosticism as marking the historic moment when faith became corrupted by philosophy. He does not, as a Socinian or anti-Trinitarian would, make the rise of a needless theology the main outcome of this misfortune. His emphasis falls rather on the effects of a division within Christianity between a learned elite and an unlearned majority,[146] the latter robbed of their inheritance from the illiterate apostles (did the Apostle John betray his colleagues to philosophy?). Not only did this intellectualise the life with Christ; it encouraged some to lead a life of contemplation and austerity – Essene or Therapeutic in its derivation – so that philosophy became an origin of monasticism. The *Institutiones* take up the theme from the *De Rebus*.

Novum hoc philosophandi genus, quum a Christiani, ab ORIGENE nimirum, aliisque imprudenter susceptum esset, gravissimis rem Christianam malis effecit. Doctores enim adduxit, ut multa religionis nostrae capita, simplicia ceteroquin et aperta, tenebris involverent philosophicis, nec pauca praeceptis Servatoris adderent, quorum nulla in sacris libris extat memoria. Idem triste illud hominum genus nobis peperit, quod *mysticorum* appellatur: e quorum disciplina si ea demas, quae Platonici de anima ortu et natura docent, corpus erit exanime ac nervis carens. Idem vitae illius ignavae fundamenta iecit, tamque numerosi *monachorum* exercitus deinde duxerunt, varios Christianis ritus vanos, ineptos et ad superstitionem fovendam utilissimos, quorum non exiguam partem ad hoc usque tempus sancte a multis servari videmus. Idem denique animos multorum a religione Christiana sequentibus saeculis alienavit, mixtumque quoddam religionis genus, seu ex Christianis et Platonicis scitis temperatum produxit. Et quis omnia illa mala, noxiasque mutationes dinumeret, quae novae huic philosophiae aut, si mavis, veram, falsamque religionem inter se conciliandi conatui originem suam debent?[147]

[146] *Institutiones*, I, pp. 119, 123–4; Maclaine, 1826, I, pp. 234–45, 244–5.
[147] *Institutiones*, pp. 80–1; cf. pp. 123–4, where the 'mystical' theology is paired with the 'scholastic'.

[This new species of philosophy, rashly adopted by Origen and too many other Christians, did grievous damage to the Christian community. It led the teachers of doctrine to entangle many heads of our religion, in themselves simple and open, in philosophical darkness; and they added many things to the precepts of our Saviour which are not to be found in the holy scriptures. It further generated that unhappy group of men called *mystics*, of whose beliefs nothing would remain, if you subtracted Platonist teachings concerning nature and the origin of the soul, but a nerveless and lifeless corpse. It also laid the foundations of that despicable rule of life by which the numerous army of *monks* have led Christians to adopt customs vain, foolish and leading to superstition, many of which we see devoutly observed even in our own time. And finally, in the centuries following its appearance it led many away from the Christian religion into a mixture or compound of Christian and Platonist principles. Who shall reckon up the evils and damaging changes brought about by this new philosophy, or if you prefer this attempt to reconcile true and false religion?]

The Protestant and Enlightened loathings of monasticism combine in this not very convincing attempt to give it a philosophical and esoteric origin. It is a temptation to enquire whether the distinction between *clerus* and *vulgus*, *illuminati* and *credentes*, arising from the engagement with esoteric philosophy, is directly linked with that between *clerici et laici*, priesthood and laity, which forms one thematic climax – there are several – to Mosheim's history of the Church before Constantine. In both his major works, however, the journey to this climax is not a direct one. The third century opens with a renewed discussion of the spread of Christianity, in which supernatural causes take less the form of miracles than that of dreams and visions, while human causes again consist of the pious endeavours and edifying virtues of the Christians[148] – not, as noted earlier, of the cultural changes suggested by Gibbon. With the growth of the Church comes the renewal of persecution, increasingly ordered by emperors rather than instigated by crowds, in which some part is played by hostile philosophers (such as Hierocles the editor of Philostratus's life of Apollonius).[149] This role of the *recentiores Platonici*, however, has been preceded, at the end of the second century, by over seventy pages[150] on the principal gnostic sects. Mosheim's inclination to set them outside the history of the Church itself is here modified by the circumstance that he has encountered the voluminous writings of Irenaeus and Tertullian, and as an early modern historian he is obliged to pursue what his historians have told him.

His account of the persecutions under Diocletian, however, significantly concludes with the martyrdom of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage.[151] Like

[148] *De Rebus*, pp. 151–2; *Institutiones*, pp. 110–11; Maclaine, 1826, I, pp. 219–20.
[149] *De Rebus*, pp. 561–3. [150] Ibid., pp. 333–410. [151] Ibid., pp. 547–58, 587–8.

Gibbon after him,[152] he is concerned with this saint both as martyr and as militant upholder of the sacred authority of bishops, and the death of Cyprian is followed by chapters on the *forma civitatis Christianae*[153] and the *iura episcoporum aucta*.[154] Mosheim enters on a detailed analysis of the latter process, but seems to make it the product of simple and almost mechanical causes. As the Church spreads, there is need of increased consultation between churches; the questions they must decide increase in number and complexity; officers must be found to preside over councils whose authority increases in extent; a hierarchy appears among bishops, and the latter consult among themselves rather than with their presbyters and congregations.[155] Mosheim insists that this was a gradual process; even Cyprian, *dignitatis et auctoritatis episcoporum vindex acerrimus*,[156] proclaims that he does not act *sine consilio cleri et presbyterorum suorum*. But by degrees (*paullatim*) the *iura* (rights? powers?) of both presbyters and congregations are lost as the bishops take over, and the latter claim to exercise their authority *aeternis praesidiis*. Their arguments are not studied in detail; most readers would expect them to have included a claim to be the direct successors of the Apostles, whom Mosheim has repeatedly said exercised only a consultative leadership over congregations. He does not seem to speak of such a claim; nor does he follow Le Clerc in indicating that philosophically generated theological disputes increased the need for collective decisions, or the authority of bishops in determining them. Nor does he seem to include persecution among the causes of this process, though there has been a suggestion that the demonstrative loyalty of congregations to their bishops at times amounted to civil disobedience and provoked emperors to further persecutions.[157] Overwhelmingly, however, Mosheim's account of the growth of episcopal authority, and of a hierarchy among the bishops which will lead from a patriarchal aristocracy to a papal monarchy, rests on simple human causes and a vocabulary of political science. Human beings, he says, naturally tend to extend the authority that falls into their hands, and find arguments that legitimate and perpetuate it.

Nec miror valde, nec indignor, rerum nempe humanarum non prorsus imperitus, quum progressus auctoritatis et dignitatis episcoporum in veteri ecclesia video, et populi primum deinde et presbyterorum antiqua iura gradatim interire animadverto. Facillime hoc fieri poterat, et necesse fere erat, ut fieret. Omnibus qui

[152] Below, pp. 278–9, 296–7. [153] *De Rebus*, pp. 574–87. [154] Ibid., pp. 587–97.
[155] Ibid., pp. 574–5, 587–8; *Institutiones*, pp. 81–2; Maclaine, 1826, I, pp. 159–61. It is Maclaine (p. 162) who perceives 'the establishment of a greater difference between the Christian pastors and their flocks than the genius of the Gospel seems to admit'.
[156] *De Rebus*, p. 575. [157] Ibid., p. 556.

primum in societate quadam locum tenent, hoc est in more positum, quia homines sunt ipsa natura imperiosi, ut potentiae et auctoritatis suae fines proferre studeant: Et facilem plerumque hi conatus fortunam inveniunt, et ab ipsis collegiis seu societatibus iuvantur. Imperio enim et auctoritate inter plures aequo iure distributa plerumque discidia et contentiones nascentur perdifficiles, quibus vix ac ne vix quidem modus statui potest, nisi capitis seu [*sic*] illius, qui ordinis princeps est, auctoritas ac dignitas augeatur. Ad haec caussam multae accedunt aliae, studia nimirum, praestandi libido, paupertas, rei augendae desiderium, quae societatis gubernatores etiam tardos et segnes, nihilque magnum appetentes, evehere tamen et in maiori gradu collocare solent. Qui his modis sive casu, sive studio suo, sive vitio hominum elati sunt, iure sibi deberi plerumque contendunt locum, quem tenent, atque rationes et argumenta circumspeciunt, quibus auctoritatem, qua fruuntur, non fortuitam, sed legitimam esse, demonstrent: unde disputationes saepe oriuntur obscurae, futiles, spinosae, verum illis qui parta tueri student, necessariae. Ut haec ad rem Christianam et crescentem paullatim episcoporum auctoritatem applicemus, necesse non est: vident facile qui sapiunt, idem, quod in rebus humanis vulgare est, inter Christianos evenire, atque primam illam aequalitatem omnium, communemque rei sacrae administrationem paullatim cadere, contra dignitatem eorum, quibus princeps ecclesiae cura commissa erat, amplificare debuisse.[158]

[As one not unacquainted with human behaviour, I am neither surprised nor indignant when I observe the growth of episcopal power and authority in the primitive Church and the steady decline of the ancient rights of presbyters and then congregations. It was very easy for this to happen, and almost necessary that it should. Since men by nature seek to rule, it is inherent in the situation of those who take the lead in any society to enlarge the scope of their power and authority. They easily find occasion for this, and are aided by association with their fellows. When office and authority are equally distributed among a number of holders, there naturally arise conflicts and contentions among them, to which a solution can hardly if at all be found, unless the weight and substance of the head of their order be increased. Many factors reinforce this, such as shared interests, the love of prestige, poverty and the need to strengthen one's position, which incite the leaders of societies, even when lazy, sluggish and unambitious, to bestir themselves and seek greater authority. Those who have been raised up, whether by chance, their own efforts, or human weaknesses, claim to hold their positions as of right, and look around for arguments and rationalisations to show that their authority is not fortuitous but legitimate. From this arise disputes, often obscure, tangled and meaningless, but necessary to those struggling to defend their positions. There is no need for us to enter upon these, as we observe Christian history and the steady increase of episcopal authority. Those of understanding will easily see that what is common in human affairs came about among the Christians, and that it had to happen that primitive equality and the common management of sacred matters disappeared, and the pre-eminence of those responsible for the affairs of the Church was enlarged.]

[158] Ibid., pp. 588–9.

Mosheim avoids both clerical disputes over the descent of authority from the Apostles and anti-clerical allegations about the sinister motives of priestcraft. It must follow, however, from this restrained account of the purely human and normal processes leading to the increase of episcopal authority, that this authority is exercised *iure humano*, not *divino*, and that the history of the Church is a history of practice, not the descent of appointed authority. This indeed he has been saying all along. His narrative is no doubt compatible with Lutheran doctrine, as much as with moderate Enlightened positions, and it remains to be seen what Gibbon has to say on such matters. The *De Rebus*, from which we have been quoting, has 300 pages to run to the end of the third century; they are taken up by an account of the theology of Origen and the disputes it generated,[159] and an account twice as long of the origins and practices of Manichaeism,[160] in which Mosheim relies for the first time on the authority of Beausobre. Once again, the writing of history is guided by the materials and authorities available to the author. The *Institutiones* tell us that Christians and neo-Platonists combined to refute gnosticism,[161] and conclude their account of the century before Constantine by significantly remarking:

Quae superiori saeculo ob ipso philosophiae Graecae in ecclesiam Christianam ingressu coeperant controversiae de divina Trinitate, hoc saeculo progrediebantur latius et plures dogma hoc explicandi formas pariebant.[162]

[The controversies over the holy Trinity, which had originated in the previous century from the inroads of Greek philosophy into the Church, became more general in this age and several ways of explaining this dogma took shape.]

It is Maclaine who insists that the doctrine is 'inexplicable' and 'incomprehensible' to human intelligence;[163] is his language sceptical or fideist? The *Institutiones* go on to an account of the patripassian heresy; but the shadow of Arius and the Council of Nicaea is on the page.

[159] Ibid., pp. 604–80. [160] Ibid., pp. 728–903.
[161] *Institutiones*, p. 132; Maclaine, 1826, I, p. 264. [162] *Institutiones*, p. 136.
[163] Maclaine, 1826, I, p. 273.

PART III

The two chapters explored

I am once more borne away in the deep and troubled torrent of Antiquity.
William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses*

CHAPTER 7

The English setting

(I) THE POLITICS OF DEBATE IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

We have now deduced – as Gibbon himself might say – a regular series[1] of ecclesiastical historians from Eusebius to Mosheim. It is not a complete history of that discipline, supposing one to be possible; the recognised 'ecclesiastical historians' of Christian antiquity – Sulpicius Severus, Sozomen, Socrates Ecclesiasticus[2] – have not appeared and do not play a crucial role in chapters 15 and 16 of the *Decline and Fall*.[3] After Tillemont *Barbarism and Religion* deserts Catholic for Protestant scholarship, and its leading figures are present because Gibbon chose to emphasise them in ways that indicate the use he made of them. They provide a context in which the two chapters may usefully be read – though it will appear that Gibbon's partial desertion of that context is an important key to the character of those chapters – and they display ecclesiastical history in the setting provided by Protestant Europe between 1680 and 1776. In that period Christian culture generated within itself many of the debates and problems we bring together in formulating the concept of 'Enlightenment', and historians in the twenty-first century discuss this process in debating the unity or plurality of that set of phenomena.[4] We have seen Gibbon employing such words as *lumière* and *éclairé* with special reference to the critical methods developed (but not invented) by Jean Le Clerc,[5] and one strand of 'Enlightenment' may be defined as the complex interactions between criticism and faith.[6]

The scholarship so far studied has been European – Arminian, Huguenot and German – but not English or British. Le Clerc, Beausobre and Mosheim were all well aware of English work and its problems in their

[1] 'I have deduced, from Trajan to Constantine, from Constantine to Heraclius, the regular series of the Roman emperors.' DF, v, ch. 48; Womersley, 1994, III, p. 23.

[2] For an introduction to these authors, see Chestnut, 1986.

[3] Sulpicius occurs several times in the footnotes to chapters 15 and 16, Socrates once, Sozomen only in other chapters. See Womersley, 1994, III, pp. 1261, 1263, 1267.

[4] Pocock, 2007, 2008, 2009; Robertson, 2005. [5] Above, p. 92. [6] Pocock, 2008.

field, but there has not been occasion to consider the major figures of English (and Anglo-Irish) learning, from Ussher and Marsham through Cave and Grabe.[7] There is no English or Scottish historian who narrates the history of the early Church on the scale of Mosheim or Fleury. One reason for this is that the Church of England, the *ecclesia Anglicana*, had and was perceived as having characteristics and problems of its own, based on its special need to maintain the Catholic elements in its tradition in some harmony with the Protestant. These, all highly debatable in the eighteenth century, included commitments to Nicene Trinitarianism, an apostolic origin for episcopacy and the authority of some at least of the post-Apostolic Fathers. All were the subject of vehement debate in the century preceding the *Decline and Fall*, and historians have been obliged to abandon older ideas of an era of sleepy complacency, in favour of one of controversy and intellectual productivity, generated by division within the Church as well as between Church, Dissent and Enlightenment. There was an active and controversial clerical culture, into which Gibbon ventured when he published the two chapters in 1776. It is a feature, however paradoxical, of that culture, not a sign of its imminent disappearance, that he was able to treat the controversy he aroused as not worth serious attention; even that degree of scepticism originated within the culture as much as outside it. He was widely charged with the intention of substituting secular history for faith in the sacred, and continues to be as widely praised for it by historians whose view of his intentions coincides with that of his clerical opponents. Hugh Blair, however, has raised the question whether, or how far, his scepticism was relevant to the history he was committed to writing, and there must follow the question how far or whether he wrote the history in order to express the scepticism. To understand not only the controversy over the two chapters, but their content, intentions and performance, it is necessary to situate them in the context of debate within the Church of England in the eighteenth century, and the problems of sacred and ecclesiastical history which that debate generated and in which Gibbon took part.

That church was accustomed, not without reason, to regard itself as in danger. As a slogan in debate or mob oratory, the cry of 'the church in danger' was much and often justly derided; but it is a fact that its place in English life, and England's place in sacred history, had been sometimes drastically challenged, and there had been moments when the state had been moved to redefine its nature without its entire consent. The change of dynasties in 1689, the Act of Toleration that followed, the union with

[7] For Gibbon's rather minimal use of the last two, see Womersley, 1994, III, pp. 1204, 1221.

Scotland in 1707 and the Hanoverian accession in 1714 had all raised questions regarding the union of Church with King and its compatibility with the former's pursuit of a sacred and apostolic history; and the question of the latter's place in a secular history accessible to reason without revelation could not be addressed without raising further questions of the place of revelation in history, spirit in flesh, and ultimately of the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth. It was these questions that Gibbon did not address in chapter 15, and was held to have dismissed and denied by his silence. There was therefore a politics of Christology in Hanoverian England,[8] which may be situated in an ecclesiastical and religious history from Cranmer to Newman and beyond. The state must decide whether it needed the support of an apostolic church or the subordination of a church less than Christ's body and a Christ less than spirit incarnate; the Church must decide whether to maintain its independence as his body, or adjust to religious pluralism and the independence of the state by accepting a more human view of his nature. The debates of Christian antiquity were therefore revived in early modern England and form part of what we call Enlightenment. There is a rich literature on these matters in recent historiography.

We may simplify this narrative for heuristic purposes, supposing that from time to time there arose a challenge to the Church's position in the state, leading to a willingness to enlarge or minimise doctrine in order to widen its support. There would be movement along a scale running from Nicene Trinitarianism through Arianism towards unitarianism, and beyond that towards a scepticism of revealed religion altogether. The term 'deism' might connote either a philosophic theism termed 'natural religion', or a pantheism that identified God with nature; and critical scepticism might fasten on any of the many points at which revelation was held to have made itself known. We have seen how in such hands as Le Clerc's, critical method might reduce both revelation and faith to the history of human attempts to formulate them, and one brand of Enlightenment held that there was nothing that might be known but the history of the human mind. The vast majority, however, of participants in these debates were clerics and Christians in search of a point where critical enquiry either supported faith or deferred to it, and the history of Enlightenment in this form went on overwhelmingly within the Christian community. Even those professing less than Trinitarian beliefs were as often moved by the desire of strengthening the Church's position in the realm as by that of

[8] See most recently Starkie, 2007.

diminishing it, and may be considered proponents of a conservative and clerical species of Enlightenment.[9]

We may select moments within this history. The Revolution of 1688–9 obliged the Church of England to choose between independence of the state and subordination to it, compatible with neither its history nor character as it saw itself; and the Toleration Act which followed opened up the question whether one could respect the beliefs of another without reducing one's own to unrevealed opinion. There were those who promoted toleration in order to produce this very result, and the Christ about whom one held opinions might well be a being less than the redeemer of mankind. The name for those who thought him something less than a redeemer came to be 'Socinian', and stood at the same time for those who thought the debate over his nature to be open-ended. There occurred in the closing years of the seventeenth century both a genuine offensive on the part of 'deists' in either sense of the term,[10] and a fear of 'deism' so widespread that the word began to be used of heterodox Christianities and near-Christianities of every kind; it is of course a notable fact of history that so many heterodoxies were to be found at this time, as at others. Clerics from Archbishop Tillotson of Canterbury to Jean Le Clerc in Amsterdam were accused of 'Socinianism' and needed to make their attitude towards the Incarnation clear; the term 'deism' was used to indicate many kinds of scepticism and became a generalised term of abuse; there were more 'unbelievers' than there were 'atheists', real or fancied,[11] and that term tended towards identification with the pantheism attributed to Spinoza.[12] John Toland's positions ranged from a criticism of texts carried to the point of radical scepticism, through a unitarianism sympathetic with the Muslim view of Jesus, to various degrees of flirtation with Spinoza;[13] but 'deism' might remain within a formal profession of Christianity, or go beyond it to the point where that religion appeared no more than one among many. The widespread fear of Toland and Collins, Bolingbroke and Voltaire, still predominant in the responses to Gibbon's two chapters, is a product of anxiety as to how far a relaxation of dogma within the Church could go before criticism substituted itself for faith; a debate situated within the

[9] Pocock, 1985b; Young, 1998b. [10] Champion, 1992.
[11] Berman, 1988; Hunter and Wootton, 1992.
[12] This figure cannot be mentioned without reference to the work of Israel, 2001 and 2006. His portrait of Spinoza as a radical prophet of modernity is not negated by the many eighteenth-century descriptions of the latter as a philosopher returned from antiquity.
[13] Jacob, 1981; Sullivan, 1982; Champion, 2003, 2004.

Moderate rather than the Radical Enlightenment. This is the account of the eighteenth-century English debate now offered in place of an older narrative in which a monolithic but crumbling 'orthodoxy' was assailed by a rational 'Enlightenment', the parent of Victorian agnosticism and modern irreligion.[14]

We may trace this scenario through a series of controversial moments. The figures as well as the actions of Bolingbroke and Toland persist through the reign of Anne, at the end of which the former appears, not even paradoxically, at the head of a near-Jacobite high-church reaction. Its defeat at the Hanoverian accession leads to a ministry which seriously contemplates repealing the Test and Corporation Acts and reducing the Church to a subordinate status in which diversity of doctrine is guaranteed. There occurs the 'Bangorian controversy',[15] in which a bishop, Benjamin Hoadly, seems to deny the Church any authority inherent in itself, and the full range of ecclesiological and theological heterodoxies and orthodoxy once more finds expression. The danger, as churchmen saw it, was averted by the political alliance known to us as 'church whiggism', and by the decision that the state needed the support of a church strong enough to maintain its doctrinal autonomy within the limits compatible with English Protestantism. This was probably the position of the majority of Gibbon's critics, most if not all of whom supported the existing establishment and saw it as founded in a revealed religion that they took Gibbon to be attacking. There remained, however, the problem of what had been termed 'Socinianism' and was increasingly termed 'freethinking', the problem raised by the toleration supported by all as they understood it: the problem of debatability. At what point did a free and liberal criticism leave off and profession of faith begin; what were the boundaries between the two and could they be crossed? The possibility of radical subversion (and with it the continuing fear of 'deism') remained and was next exploited by Conyers Middleton.

(ii) Middleton and the issue of miracles

A Free Enquiry into the Miraculous Powers which are Supposed to have Subsisted in the Christian Church from the Earliest Ages through Several Successive Centuries[16] occasioned scandal from its first publication in 1749, and is important to both the genesis and the reception of the *Decline and*

[14] From Stephen, 1876, to Trevor-Roper, 2010. [15] Starkie, 2007. [16] Middleton, 1752, 1.

Fall.[17] It is mentioned together with Beausobre in a footnote to the *Essai sur l'étude de la littèrature* of 1761[18] and recurs in Gibbon's journal of his readings in 1763.[19] There is significant use of it in chapter 15, and most of Gibbon's critics agreed in regarding him as Middleton's follower. In one of his draft autobiographies, furthermore, he gives the *Free Enquiry* a crucial role in bringing about his brief conversion to Catholicism as an Oxford undergraduate, forcing him to choose between denying all authority to the Christian Church and believing that authority to have persisted in Roman hands to the present day.[20] There are evidential difficulties about this narrative – it surprised Lord Sheffield, who had never heard Gibbon speak of it – and it has been interpreted as a piece of autobiographical fiction.[21] In his *Vindication* of the two chapters, published in 1778, Gibbon adverted to the *Free Enquiry*, presenting its author (as he had in his journal fifteen years earlier) as one who had carried scepticism as far as it was possible for a Christian to go and perhaps further.[22] This was exactly what was being said of Gibbon himself, and both writers presented their contemporaries with the problem that has continued to present itself to historians: that of deciding how far to pursue a potentially unlimited scepticism they had left implicit. Gibbon wondered how far Middleton had meant to go; Gibbon's critics asked (and answered) the same question of him; Blair asked why Gibbon had exposed himself to the question when historical narrative did not require it. It was the question both writers imposed – whether or not intentionally is a further problem – on their contemporary readers and on historians ever since: how far was their critical method and its implied scepticism to be carried into matters of which they did not speak? The fact that it could be so carried but that they had chosen to remain silent encouraged the belief that their scepticism was without limits; silence, as in many tribunals, was considered evidence of intention and therefore of guilt. It was, however, possible for critical scepticism to be without limits; a 'deist' might be one who would say nothing of God he could not substantiate by the rules of philological or epistemological criticism, and there were beginning to be those – like Hume and probably Gibbon

[17] I am indebted to John Robertson and Brian Young for allowing me to see two important essays in advance of their publication: Hugh Trevor-Roper, 'From deism to history: Conyers Middleton', now published in Trevor-Roper, 2010, and Young, 'Conyers Middleton: the historical consequences of heterodoxy', to appear in Mortimer and Robertson, forthcoming. The strikingly distinct views expressed in these essays have been of great assistance to my understanding of the relevant historiography.

[18] MW, IV, p. 70; above, p. 138. [19] *Journal B*, p. 224.

[20] EEG, pp. 45–9, where Gibbon's narrative was accepted as veracious.

[21] Womersley, 2002, pp. 309–13. [22] Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1151.

himself – prepared to say that according to those rules nothing could or should be said of God at all. It was therefore possible to believe that critical scepticism was without limits; possible and rather too easy to believe that by saying nothing of those limits, Middleton and Gibbon had intimated that they did not exist.

Historians have faced this methodological problem and have found it easy – especially when themselves strongly agnostic – to endorse while warmly applauding the judgement of these authors formed by Christian contemporaries who condemned them in consequence of it. They agree with eighteenth-century clerics that Middleton and Gibbon intended by their silence to intimate disbelief in both Christ and God, and intended by their irony to indicate how disbelief might be intimated. It is of course possible that this was the case. What is less defensible is the reading of history as the simple collision between Christian orthodoxy, often presented as monolithic, repressive and ridiculous, and a rationalist criticism presented as equally systematic and complete. Leslie Stephen, pioneering this narrative at the end of the nineteenth century, knew the case was not quite so simple. He saw the deists as highly unsatisfactory precursors of the Victorian agnostics, but still judged them as attempting to meet the latter's standards;[23] and historians in the twentieth century constructed histories of disbelief more whiggishly triumphalist than this. The present volume attempts a different reading: one in which there were many pressures for and against Nicene and Trinitarian orthodoxy, towards many modifications of traditional beliefs, generating many patterns of discourse and many patterns of controversy. At the extremes of debate it was always possible to perceive the dangers of scepticism and the problematic nature of belief itself; but the debate with few exceptions went on within the parameters of Christian belief and continued a discourse which could be traced through Christian history. To construct a history of these debates, it is necessary to take account of the parameters of belief and the nature of belief itself, and to understand what believers as well as unbelievers – even more, those in discourse situations where belief might be, but was not immediately, threatened – were saying and doing. Much of this enquiry will be conducted in fields of discourse where questions of silence and implication had not yet arisen, and may assist us in seeing how and where they did arise.

The issue raised by Middleton was that of miracles. It is necessary to understand the function of miracles in the Christian belief system. They

[23] Stephen, 1876 (and subsequent editions), passim.

were not merely wonders, designed to produce belief in the supernatural as such; they were signs and evidences of divine authority and inspiration in the person performing them. Those performed by Jesus himself were indeed designed to produce belief in doctrines too extraordinary for immediate apprehension; but they paled in significance beside the Incarnation, the Resurrection and the Atonement, which were not signs but acts transcending and transforming the human condition.[24] The more attention shifted – as in the eighteenth century it tended to do – away from these acts towards the thesis that he came to reinforce human morality by the promise of eternal life, the more necessary it became that he should have performed miracles as a sign that his mission was divine; while no less paradoxically, the fact that Muhammad had disclaimed miraculous powers tended to reinforce the belief that he was an impostor (though such acts would have been dismissed as fraudulent had he claimed to perform them). The Apostles had been invested with miraculous powers on the day of Pentecost, and had needed them to convince Jews and Gentiles that they continued the action of the Holy Spirit; but at this point there occurred a fundamental disagreement between Catholics, who asserted that these powers persisted in the Church as Christ's continued presence, and Protestants, who held that they had at some point ceased – just when was not a necessary article of belief – and that he had continued his presence in the Word of Scripture alone. To attack their continuation after a given point in history was therefore consistent with Protestant Christianity.

Middleton was concerned to deny the authority of miracles performed in and after the second century of the Christian era; that is by, or reported by, the Fathers of the Church living after the time of the Apostles. Le Clerc had supposed that time to end with the death of the Apostle John in AD 100; Middleton accepts this convention, while observing that the miraculous powers accorded the Apostles at Pentecost need not be supposed to have lasted to the moment of John's death; it is possible, he says, that they were already in disuse.[25] What is of immediate significance is that they are neither claimed nor reported by the group known as Apostolic Fathers, who may have seen the Apostles, or heard those who had seen them.[26] The problem of tradition and transmission of authority is before us. There is, however, an interval of perhaps fifty years, Middleton says, before miracles, other than those performed by the Apostles, begin to be reported by a

[24] For a succinct statement of this position by a Moderate divine, c. 1751, see Jortin, 1805, II, pp. 2–17.
[25] Middleton, 1752, I, p. xxi. [26] Ibid., I, p. 57.

second cohort of Fathers, specifically Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, and it is their evidence which he proceeds to discredit.

Middleton's *Enquiry*, appearing in several stages, came under sustained attack, to which he wrote replies, from those who wished to retain the authority of the Fathers, much assaulted by others within the Protestant and Anglican communions, but as energetically retained within the latter for reasons affecting its Catholic continuity and extending far beyond the issues raised by Middleton.[27] A charge against him was that the reasons he gave for disbelieving the miracles reported in the second Christian century and after might all too easily be given for rejecting those reported of the Apostles, or even, *per impossibile* and *pro pudore*, Jesus Christ himself (reported by Evangelists of whom two, Matthew and John, had been Apostles and therefore witnesses). It is on the strength of this charge that rests Middleton's reputation as a clandestine exponent of Enlightened religious scepticism; if he did not believe in the miracles of Christ, he may not have believed in his divinity. Leslie Stephen would clearly have thought better of Middleton if he had resigned his priestly orders[28] (following the example of several Victorian agnostics, including Stephen himself).

At this point it is easy to suppose that Middleton's rejection of miracles was rationalist and scientific in character, based on the belief that the operations of nature are invariable to the point where no departure from them can be accepted by the reasoning intelligence, and that to do so is to abandon reason itself – a position which Hume was to elaborate into a philosophical scepticism of his own. It is not this, however, which we find in Middleton's texts, and to insist that it is present is to risk the error of supposing that the absence of an argument is proof that it is being concealed and is there all the time. What is to be found in Middleton is a sustained and immensely vehement assault on the authority of those second-century Fathers – Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, backed by Tertullian – who report miracles; an authority which must be false, not because miracles are essentially incredible, but because their whole method of reasoning is false – a falsity based in turn upon the radical falsity of their use of language. We return at a single step to the world of Jean Le Clerc, displayed in his writings of the 1680s and 1690s, though it is the *Historia Ecclesiastica* which Middleton quotes in two places.[29]

Le Clerc had indicted the Fathers' use of a magniloquent and figurative style, from which no clear meaning could be extracted. Middleton goes far

[27] For a recent study of the growth of Anglican patristics in the seventeenth century, see Quantin, 2009. I have seen no comparable study of the century following.

[28] EEG, p. 46; Stephen, 1902, I, p. 254. McCloy, [1993], p. 351. [29] Middleton, 1752, I, pp. 42, 67.

beyond the indication Le Clerc had given that the use of such language was conducive to enthusiasm, in which the speaker no longer knew what he was saying but believed himself to be inspired. Of Justin he says:

> his works are but little else than . . . the pure flights of an enthusiastic fancy and heated brain, which no man in his sober senses could mistake for divine revelations,[30]

and, more fully still,

> As to *Irenaeus*'s manner of expounding the Scriptures, it is much the same with that of *Justin*, or rather, according to Dr *Grabe*,[31] with that of the age, in which he lived: following no rule of criticism, nor giving any attention to the proper signification of words; but indulging a wild and enthusiastic fancy, in the invention of typical senses, and forced allusions, utterly trifling and contemptible; *which those, who read the Fathers, must always bear in mind*, as a learned Critic observes, *or they will be drawn into great and frequent errors*. [n. Quod iis, qui Scriptores Ecclesiasticos legunt, perpetuo *animo observari oportet, ne in frequentes et graves errores incidere velint*. Jo. Cleric. Hist. Eccles. P. 775][32]

Language thus misused can be the source of belief in miracles; instead of directing attention to the evidence of the senses, and the relations between causes and effects, it encourages belief in signs and wonders, types and shadows, so that the intellect seeks and finds the presence of the divine actor and his authority in the occurrences of normal life. To see the work of Providence in everyday life is one thing; to reduce it to a succession of wonders is another; but as there is language which contains its own means of self-criticism, so there is language which incessantly mystifies itself. Tillemont and Le Clerc had agreed that Justin Martyr fell into errors – the millennium, the sexuality of angels[33] – but in Middleton he is a mystagogue, absurdly finding the cross as a sign in all material being. Irenaeus follows him in the pursuit of types and shadows, and this un-Lockean absurdity, reducing ideas to signs, becomes their principal technique in the interpretation of both Testaments. Nor do they stop there; both Justin and Irenaeus are suspect of forgery in their presentation of scriptural texts,[34] a possibility to which Gibbon seems once to allude.[35] We have reached an original moment in the corruption of Christian doctrine, arising from the corruption of language itself; though the sources of that corruption appear to remain unexplained.

If we are to find Enlightenment in Middleton, it must be initially the Enlightenment originating in Le Clerc's *Ars Critica* and his letter to

[30] Ibid., I, p. 25. [31] Grabe, 1698, 1700, 1702. [32] Middleton, 1752, I, p. 42.
[33] Above, p. 68. [34] Middleton, 1752, I, pp. 47–8.
[35] DF, I, ch. 15 n. 187; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 509.

Locke in 1688; but the function of criticism is to challenge the continuity, and therefore the authority, of any tradition or transmission of Catholic doctrine through the Fathers following the Apostles. It is here, of course, that Middleton has to make it clear that his discrediting of the Fathers is not retroactive. The Apostolic Fathers do not allege miracles, and the slide into wonder-working, allegory and the priestcraft that anticipates popery begins only after them. Middleton quotes Locke's *Third Letter on Toleration*:

> he who will build his faith or reasonings upon miracles delivered by Church Historians, *will find cause to go further than the Apostles time, or else, not to stop at Constantin's*,[36]

since to believe in miracles on the evidence accepted by 'church historians' is to accept the Roman contention that they continue in the Church to this day, while to affirm them on the authority of the same historians is to affirm on unsound grounds the miracles performed by Christ and the Apostles. These are attested, not by 'historians' but by Evangelists who were ocular witnesses; after them the delusions of tradition and language begin. Middleton elaborates and insists on the dilemma, as Gibbon will. There is no moment to be found at which the cessation of miracles insisted on by Protestants is attested;[37] on the contrary, the Fathers and saints of every age insist that they are continuing, and this is attested by saintly men of intellect and character far above Justin and Irenaeus[38] (who remain disreputable figures). Middleton must resort to wielding the razor, insisting that all post-apostolic miracles are unacceptable; and he can account for their continued attestations only by supposing that those who have attested them either think it necessary to deceive the vulgar or have succeeded in deceiving themselves. He says that

> every impartial reader . . . from the credulous and enthusiastic disposition of these Fathers, and their preconceived and erroneous notions about the origin and power of Daemons, will be apt to conclude, that they were either induced by their prejudices, to give too hasty a credit to these pretended Possessions; or carried away by their zeal, to assist even in supporting a delusion, which was useful to the Christian cause . . . And with regard to these very Fathers, there is not one of them, as an eminent writer of ecclesiastical history declares, who made any scruple in those ages, of using the *hyperbolic style*, to advance the honour of God, and the salvation of men. [J. Cleric. Hist. Eccles. P. 681][39]

[36] The quotation occurs at Middleton, 1752, I, p. v. [37] Ibid., I, p. 88.
[38] Ibid., I, pp. 129–30. [39] Ibid., I, p. 67.

The argument remains Leclercian; language conducive to enthusiasm can be a means of deceiving either oneself or others, possibly both; but the mention of Christian belief in the reality of demons carries us further. The casting out of demons was one of the powers falsely claimed by the Fathers, though truly exercised by the Apostles and of course by Christ in person; and Middleton was on dangerous ground when explaining why it was a delusion or imposture in later Christian history, while retaining it as truth in the gospel and canonical narratives. Had the demons all died with the great god Pan, at the moment of Christ's death? He does not say. Of post-apostolic times he says that necromancers and wonder-workers abounded, among Christians, Jews and pagans,[40] and were accepted as authentic by those deluded by their speech into enthusiasm. Such delusions extended further, into claims to prophesy, to see visions and to raise the dead; Middleton reviews a series of such claims, several of which recur in Gibbon's fifteenth chapter and raise the question of how far Gibbon was following him. A signal instance is one briefly mentioned by Gibbon, but by Middleton at considerable length:[41] the pagan Autolycus tells his friend Theophilus, a bishop, that he will accept Christianity if satisfied of one such case, but Theophilus declines the challenge. The setting of this story is Irenaeus's claim that such miracles were often performed in his time; Middleton and Gibbon alike treat this as evidence of a widely held delusion. Unlike the latter, Middleton extends the argument into the belief in immortality (the second of Gibbon's five causes); he says that necromancers of every religion, the Christian included, attempted to raise the dead, and sometimes succeeded, in search of proofs of immortality.[42] He proceeds to a passage which seems to anticipate one of Gibbon's.

> Every man will perceive, how easy it must have been to men of that class . . . to impose the tricks of their art, as the effects of a supernatural power, on a multitude already persuaded, that they lived on magic ground, expressed at every step to snares and charms, continued by malicious Spirits, perpetually haunting them, and watching every unguarded moment, to get possession of their souls and bodies. And when pious Christians are arrived to this pitch of credulity, as to believe, that evil spirits or evil men can work real miracles, in defiance and opposition to the authority of the Gospel, their very piety will oblige them, to admit as miraculous, whatever is pretended to be wrought in the defense of it, and to make them of course the implicit dupes of their own wonder-workers.[43]

[40] Ibid., I, pp. 64–5. [41] Womersley, 1994, I, p. 473; Middleton, 1752, I, pp. 58–61, 343–51.
[42] Middleton, 1752, I, p. 54. [43] Ibid., I, pp. 57–8.

It is hard not to hear echoes of this passage of 1749 in reading Gibbon twenty-seven years later:

> The primitive Christians perpetually trod on mystic ground, and their minds were exercised by the habits of believing the most extraordinary events. They felt, or they fancied, that on every side they were incessantly assaulted by daemons, confronted by visions, instructed by prophecy, and surprisingly delivered from danger, sickness, and from death itself, by the supplications of the Church. The real or imaginary prodigies, of which they so frequently conceived themselves to be the objects, the instruments, or the spectators, very happily disposed them to adopt with the same ease, but with far greater justice, the authentic wonders of the evangelic history; and thus miracles that exceeded not the measure of their own experience, inspired them with the most lively assurance of mysteries which were acknowledged to surpass the limits of their understanding.[44]

As we shall see, Gibbon's critics commonly thought he was following Middleton; but their arguments diverge. Both authors seem to maintain the authenticity of the gospel and apostolic miracles; but in affirming the falsity of all reported thereafter, Middleton is embarking on a theme more expressly anti-clerical than any Gibbon pursues. He situates the beginnings of the corruption of Christianity fifty years after the deaths of the Apostles, locating it in the hyperbole and enthusiasm of Justin and Irenaeus; and all the false miracles and false claims that follow are, he announces, the beginnings of popery, which only a rigorously scriptural Protestantism can avert.[45] Gibbon's critics, we shall find, would have been content had he traced those beginning from an era after Constantine, and were angry because he left it unspecified to what starting point he was referring. Middleton was specific; he traced them from the second century, from a moment only fifty years after the last Apostle, and from the language of the post-Apostolic Fathers. Here too we find him, admittedly in another and earlier work than the *Free Enquiry*, anticipating Gibbon in two noteworthy ways. In *A Letter from Rome, Shewing an Exact Conformity between Popery and Paganism* (1729), he first gives an account very like Gibbon's of the imaginative excitement of entering the Eternal City and treading where the heroes of antiquity have trod[46] – he later wrote a two-volume life of Cicero, whom he considered a rational deist[47] – and then recounts his discovery that innumerable Catholic observances, the cults of saints,

[44] Womersley, 1994, I, p. 475; see below, p. 266.
[45] Middleton, 1752, I, pp. 139–41, 237.
[46] Ibid., III, pp. 66–7. Young, in Mortimer and Robertson, forthcoming, makes this essay crucial in the development of Middleton's heterodoxy.
[47] Middleton, 1741.

martyrs, shrines, relics, pilgrimages and calendars, are directly derived from the recorded cults of polytheism. As a result, he says,

> by a change only of *name*, they have found means to retain the *thing*; and by substituting *their Saints* in the place of the old *Demigods*, have but set up *Idols* of their own, instead of those of their *Forefathers*.[48]

Gibbon was to cite the *Letter from Rome* in chapter 28 of the *Decline and Fall*, where the systematic destruction of the pagan cults by the emperor Theodosius is followed, instantly and ironically, by the rebirth of polytheism in the form of saint-worship.[49] It is the moment when Christianity becomes a cultic religion replacing those it has destroyed; perhaps the most massive transformation in its history. Middleton is less theoretical and his history of religion less philosophical, but he supplied Gibbon with the fundamental irony that the enthusiasm of the Fathers generates the superstition of the popes and (needless to say) the monks.

Middleton had rested his indictment of Justin and Irenaeus wholly on the charge that their enthusiastic language led them to affirm the continuity of miracles, but there is a critical dimension to his story which he appears to neglect. Justin Martyr is central to the history of theology in his account of how Platonism led him to the brink of Christian belief but not into it; Irenaeus narrates how 'John the disciple of the Lord' refuted Cerinthus and the gnostics and kept the Redeemer consubstantial with the Creator. Does Middleton mean us to suppose that these affirmations were effects of the hyperbole and enthusiasm that were corrupting the speech and thought of the Fathers? The group of texts around the *Free Enquiry* does not seem to answer this question; but in an apparently unrelated tract, *Reflections on the Variations, or Inconsistencies, which are Found among the Four Evangelists in their different Accounts of the same Facts*,[50] we find something more radical than anything so far, which may bear on the miracles and the central mysteries alike, yet says nothing specific about philosophy or theology.

> To conclude: the chief purpose of these inquiries, is, to shew, that Christianity cannot be defended to the satisfaction of speculative and thinking men, but by reducing it to its original simplicity, and stripping it of the false glosses and systems, with which it has been incumbered, through the prejudices of the pious, as well as the arts of the crafty and interested. One of the principal of these incumbrances, as far as I am able to judge, is the notion, which is generally inculcated by our Divines, concerning *the perpetual inspiration and infallibility of the Apostles and Evangelists*: a notion, which has imported such difficulties and perplexities into the system of the Christian religion, as all the wit of men has not been able to

[48] Ibid., p. 83. [49] Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 90–7. [50] Middleton, 1752, II, pp. 21–78.

explain; which yet will all be easily solved and vanish at once, by admitting only the contrary notion *that the Apostles were fallible*: which is a sort of proof that generally passes with men of sense for demonstrative; being of the same kind by which Sir Isaac Newton has convinced the world of the truth of his philosophical principles.[51]

An appeal to the experimental method – Middleton is by no means in agreement with Sir Isaac on questions of chronology[52] – does not answer the question of how to recover the original simplicity of the Gospels, or determine when the Apostles may be relied on. What of their miracles, or Christ's? The Christian reader might ask whether he was to be left with any creed but critical method. If we further ask why and in what ways the Apostles were fallible, an *Essay on the Gift of Tongues* gives us an answer more specific than ordinary human weakness or the simplicity of illiterate fishermen. Erasmus, Grotius and Heinsius are called in, one after the other, to inform us that the Apostles and Evangelists spoke a barbarous dialect of Hebraised Greek,[53] from which clear ideas and orderly expositions were not to be expected, and which, as we have repeatedly seen, might easily generate enthusiasm in those who spoke without understanding themselves. The critical Enlightenment of Richard Simon and Jean Le Clerc has re-asserted itself. And in particular, the Apostle John who,

> as both the antients and the moderns with one voice declare, was, of all the Apostles, the most barbarous in his language, and ignorant of letters[54] . . . did not write his *Greek* Gospel, till he was extremely old, and had lived many years in *Asia*.[55]

Did these words, or did they not, apply to his composition of the opening words of his Gospel, in which we hear that the Word has been made Flesh and has dwelt among us? Middleton had opened a Leclercian door, through which the effects of language and enthusiasm might be traced back to Galilee and Ephesus, as well as forward to Alexandria and Rome. He does not tell us, and perhaps it is not clear,[56] what he thought about the divinity of Christ (a larger subject than his miracles). A Leclercian answer might have been that we could believe but never know, and that the history of beliefs on this matter was all that could be known. Gibbon was to be accused of developing a scepticism just as far-reaching, but in the absence of Le Clerc's sense of the historicity of language – which he certainly knew

[51] Ibid., II, pp. 73–4. [52] Ibid., II, pp. 225–6. [53] Ibid., II, pp. 90–1, 94.
[54] Ibid., II, p. 96. [55] Ibid., II, p. 103.
[56] Quantin, 2009, p. 408 n. 35, on Middleton's unpublished writings; Trevor-Roper, 2010; Young, in Mortimer and Robertson, forthcoming.

about, but did not deploy – he could be charged with doing this only through the arts of irony. As we shall see, he made the early Christians enthusiasts, but not specifically the Fathers; and the Fourth Gospel is central to chapter 21, but not chapter 15. Middleton was no ironist, but a man given to taking the scornful vehemence of controversy to the brink of unbelief and leaving it there.

(iii) warburton and the history of immortality

Autodidact bishops are not common in the history of the Church of England. William Warburton (1698–1779) attended no university,[57] and his remarkable erudition was his own achievement; so too were his desperate insecurity and love of violent controversy, which regularly reached levels of paranoia. A convinced follower of John Locke, he was a church whig and no deist; his acquaintance with Conyers Middleton did not involve him in the latter's low-church desire to diminish doctrine to a level even Gibbon thought incompatible with belief. His place in the history of ecclesiastical historiography results from the endeavour, which preoccupied him for many years, to construct a history of the Christian revelation by setting out a history of ancient Greek and Jewish ideas of personal immortality. Such a history was to be one of Gibbon's five secondary causes of the spread of Christianity, and in developing his thesis Warburton was led to give an account of the civic religion that preceded it which greatly illuminates what Gibbon has to say of its overthrow by the new faith. So close are the relations between chapters 15 and 16 of the *Decline and Fall* and Warburton's *Divine Legation of Moses* that the present writer was once moved to describe the two works as the principal achievements of the 'conservative Enlightenment' in Hanoverian England;[58] a judgement which has found some support,[59] even though the *Divine Legation* is eccentric, unmanageable and not easily readable, and the *Decline and Fall* is a classic of English prose.

The individual soul's survival after death, while plainly a necessary if not a sufficient article of Christian belief, was not one which had occasioned a great body of apologetic; there had been few who denied it and it had not needed defending. Warburton, however, made it a central feature of his claim for Christianity as a revealed religion, and Gibbon made the growth of belief in it central to his history while insisting that reason and philosophy could never have arrived at it; he might not have done

[57] ODNB, lvii (Young), pp. 268–74. See further Young, 1998b, pp. 167–212.
[58] Pocock, 1985a. [59] Young, 1998b, p. 174.

so if Warburton had not written the *Divine Legation*.[60] In the course of his argument Warburton developed a series of theses about ancient civil religion and ancient philosophy, which help us understand why Gibbon will be found turning his attention away from the latter and towards the former; a field of study of which we have not heard much from the historians so far studied.

The doctrine of immortality became the more important as attention shifted from Christ as atonement and redeemer from sins towards Christ as reinforcing natural morality with the promise of eternal life; a move possibly Socinian and certainly Enlightened in its emphasis on man's natural sociability. Warburton set out to vindicate the revealed character of the religion of the Old Testament – and by extension its perfection in the revelation of Jesus Christ – by the paradoxical argument that though a belief in rewards and punishments after death was essential to the being of civil society, it was unknown to Israel under the Mosaic dispensation, and the Jews had been kept convinced of their divine legation by the perpetual exercise of divine providence in an immediate theocracy. This argument failed to win much support; it was far easier to believe that the Jews already knew what Jesus proclaimed to them; and the real impact of Warburton's thesis lay outside biblical theology, in what it moved him to say about the religion of the Gentiles. Here were civil societies in which the doctrine of immortality played its role as a civil necessity; yet it had not been revealed to them any more than to the Jews, and Warburton altogether concurred with the position, later adopted by Gibbon for his own purposes, that it could not be discovered by philosophy. How then had it been established in Gentile societies, and what had been the role of Gentile philosophy? Here Warburton was led to put forward a complex history of religion and philosophy in the city civilisation of the ancient Mediterranean, which furnishes the true link between the *Divine Legation* and the *Decline and Fall*.

It was no doubt true that post-diluvian humans remembered the religion of their ancestors directly ruled by God, but

> Let us suppose . . . that *Gentile* Religion owes its birth to the improved and cultivated mind. Now, if we make collections from the nature of things, it will be found more likely that these northern Savages should longer preserve the notions of God, and the practices of Religion, than the southern Citizens.[61]

[60] Warburton, 1738–65, reprint 1978; Warburton, 1837 (condensed from Richard Hurd's six-volume edition of 1811. The text followed in footnotes to this chapter).
[61] Warburton, 1837, I, p. 176 (Book II, section i).

> The *object* of what we call *Religion*, being God, considered as the creator and preserver of a species of rational beings, the *subject* of it must be each individual of that species. This is that idea of Religion, which our common reason approves. But now, in ancient paganism, *Religion* was a very different thing. It had for its *subject*, not only the *natural man*, that is, each Individual; but likewise the *artificial man*, Society; by and for whom, all the *public* rites and ceremonies of it were instituted and performed. And while that part of pagan Religion, whose subject[s] were individuals, bore an inferior part, and was confessed to be under an unequal Providence, the consideration of which brought in the doctrine of a future state for the support of God's government; the other, whose subject was the artificial man, Society, taught a more equal Providence, administered to the State.[62]

Religion in the ancient city was not only social, but the actual worship of society and sociability; an important point in an era when Enlightenment was seeking to subject belief to the disciplines of civil society. Warburton, believing in 'the alliance of church and state', was both encouraging that reduction and as a churchman pointing out that it was spiritually insufficient. In Mediterranean antiquity, there had followed a number of important consequences. In the first place, the gods of the city were the gods of the city worshipping itself. 'Paganism', the name given by Christians to Greek and Roman religion, was a tissue of rituals and portents designed to perpetuate the city's institutions and guide them through the endless changes of fortune.[63] With these went the myths of tutelary deities, of whom every city had its own, probably heroes deified by popular superstition and the wisdom of legislators who had themselves been deified by the alliance of superstition and legislation. Warburton as a Christian must condemn this as spiritually harmful but praise it as socially valuable. It was more than an invention, a natural growth of society.

> But if now it should be objected that it was natural for the people, left to themselves, to run into these superstitions, we may readily grant it without prejudice to the argument. For they are always such notions as are apt to be entertained and cherished by vulgar minds, whose current the wise Magistrate is accustomed to turn to his advantage. For to think him capable of new modelling the human mind, by *making* man religious whom he did not *find* so, is, as will be shown hereafter, a senseless whimsy, entertained by the Atheist to account for the origin of Religion. And when it is seen that all these various modes of superstition concurred to promote the Magistrate's purpose, it can hardly be doubted but he gave them that general direction.[64]

[62] Ibid., I, p. 179. [63] Ibid., I, p. 180n. [64] Ibid., I, p. 181.

Humans are naturally sociable and naturally religious, but without direct divine guidance they can worship only what they find for themselves. When they have found stable patterns of social living, they worship these and give them imaginative expression, and once there has appeared the possibility of intelligent policy, the magistrate legislates the religion of society. He does not, however, promote a single, still less a universal, system, and there can be no church in the sense of a society within the state held together by its beliefs. The rituals, myths and superstitions of paganism are infinitely diverse and perpetually changeable.

> Ancient Paganism was an aggregate of several distinct Religions, derived from so many pretended revelations. Why it abounded in these proceeded in part from the great number of Gods of human invention. As these Religions were not laid on the foundation, so neither were they raised on the destruction of one another. *They were not laid on the foundation of one another*; because, having given to their Gods, as local tutelary deities, contrary natures and dispositions, and distinct and separate interests, each God set up on his own bottom, and held little in common with the rest. *They were not raised on the destruction of one another*; because, as hath been observed, the several Religions of Paganism did not consist in matters of belief and dogmatic theology, in which, where there is a contrariety, Religions destroy one another; but in matters of practice, in Rites and Ceremonies, and in these a contrariety did no harm; For, having given their Gods different natures and interests, where was the wonder if they clashed in the commanded Rites; or if their worshippers should think this no mark of their false pretensions?
>
> These were horrible defects in the very essence of Pagan theology; and yet from these would necessarily arise *an universal toleration*; for each Religion admitting the other's pretensions, there must needs be a perfect harmony and INTERCOMMUNITY among them.[65]

We have reached the heart of the problem of toleration – intolerance springs from the discovery of truth – and of persecution; the Christians were persecuted as atheists, for denying the gods of others as false, and as enemies of the human race, for denying the intercommunity of mankind founded on the multiple religions of sociability. This was how Marcus Aurelius had come to be a persecutor. At a later point they would persecute one another, since there had arisen a contrariety of beliefs whose truths destroyed one another. Warburton dealt with these matters at length while laying the blame on state as well as church. A church whig, he believed in an established national religion, with privileged access to the state but able to extend toleration to dissenters – the Test Act and Toleration Act in alliance. It was small wonder (and not the fault of the Church) if the Roman empire

[65] Ibid., I, p. 383 (Book II, section vi).

had got this wrong at the first time of establishing a religion of truth as a religion of state. Warburton, however, saw the relations between state and truth as creating a fundamental problem in pagan history as well as Christian: the problem of philosophy and immortality.

Once survival after death could be imagined – as appeared widespread if not universal in both savage and ancient cultures – the magistrate might perceive the absolute necessity for such a belief to the maintenance of civil society. Warburton is more anxious to proclaim this as an axiom than to trace its origins as an idea; but he insists that these origins are political, and appears to regard the idea as a necessary consequence of social morality. It is proclaimed by the legislator, and reinforced as ritual mystery for those who need to go beyond the popular superstitions (Warburton's account of the mysteries was to be a controversial feature of his system). At this point in history, however, philosophers appear whose concern is not with society but with metaphysics. Like Hobbes, and like many Christians, Warburton does not find it easy to explain how such people came to be, or what role they played in ancient culture. The central fact is that their intellectual systems are not capable of affirming the soul's immortality; though Warburton is not relying on Beausobre, the problem of creation *ex nihilo* seems to offer an explanation. When the philosophers speak publicly in the city, they endorse the magistrate's proclamation of a life after death; in private they discuss doctrines incompatible with it. Since immortality is a doctrine and not a ritual practice – the cult of the mysteries does not conceal that – the philosophers cannot dismiss or support it as customary superstition; they therefore proclaim as truth in public what they deny in private. Here Warburton enters on Straussian territory; both religion and philosophy are public and esoteric at the same time; and he is able to denounce the philosophers of antiquity as teaching a 'double doctrine'[66] – the philosophical contradicting the political – and as 'knaves in practice and fools in theory'.[67] The last term may mean only that the double doctrine is intellectually absurd and may deceive even the knave; he quotes the Tacitean phrase *fingunt simul creduntque*, and mentions the enthusiast who deceives himself.[68] It is certain that philosophy could not have arrived at a reasoned doctrine of immortality, not yet revealed even to the Jews; and what ancient metaphysics were now requires explanation.

[66] The exposure of the 'double doctrine' takes up all of Book III of the *Divine Legation*.

[67] Warburton, 1837, I, p. 531. Cf. p. 529, for Paul on how the wise became fools, and Synesius of Ptolemais, 'no small fool either' for accepting a bishopric while disbelieving the Resurrection.

[68] Ibid., I, p. 561. Like Hume, he names Cromwell and his associates at this point.

The *Divine Legation* is said to be written on the principles of a 'Christian Deist'.[69] Whatever is meant by this term, Warburton does not think the ancient (perhaps pre-Newtonian) philosophers capable of contemplating nature and arriving at the being of God. When they were not atheists in the sense that they were sceptics, they were atheists in the sense that they were pantheists; in a culture where there were gods for everything, it was easy to draw, perhaps hard to escape, the conclusion that everything was God and God everything. The figure of Spinoza predictably appears, and it is emphasised that his thought was a regression to antiquity.[70] When the philosophers seemed to speak of the soul surviving the death of the body, they did not intend an immortality of the person; they meant only that it rejoined τό ἕν, the unity of all things from which it had been an emanation, and from which it was only a step to declaring a universal materialism.[71] Here Gibbon intervened, prior to the publication of the *Decline and Fall*. In an essay of 1770,[72] he took issue with Warburton's reading of the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, suggesting that the hero's descent into the underworld was not a poetic representation of mysteries that intimated immortality, and that Virgil was an Epicurean or Lucretian materialist like most Romans of his time. This was little more than a correction within the Warburtonian system, which Gibbon took more seriously than he did its author's literary personality. When in a famous sentence he remarked that ancient religions all seemed to the people equally true, to the philosopher equally false, and to the magistrate equally useful,[73] he need not have been making a cynical comment on religion in general. The words are a sober Warburtonian judgement on the religions of the ancient city, to which alone they apply in the context of their appearance.

Conyers Middleton was initially a friend of Warburton, who did not regard him as a co-conspirator with Bolingbroke and Shaftesbury, the *bêtes noires* of deism as he saw it.[74] They disagreed, and their friendship began to cool,[75] over the interpretation of Cicero. Middleton's *Life*, published in 1741 when Warburton was already at work on the *Divine Legation*, presents Cicero as an exemplar of rational religion, who had observed as

[69] See the full title. [70] Warburton, 1837, I, p. 506.

[71] The term might denote the first person in the Platonic trinity (ibid., I, p. 513), or more generally the totality of being (Book III, passim).

[72] *Critical Observations on the Sixth Book of the Aeneid*. EE, pp. 131–62; A, pp. 280–3.

[73] DF, I, ch. 2; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 56.

[74] An entertaining anthology might be compiled of Warburton's remarks about these noblemen, e.g. 'But his Lordship, like other great men, is not easily approached; and when he is, not always fit to be seen.' Warburton exercised his wit too often.

[75] Hurd's life of Warburton (1837, I, pp. 21, 367). He indicates that they also disagreed over 'the origins of popish ceremonies'.

a magistrate the customs of his city while believing in a God and a future state of rewards and punishments. This was not satisfactory to Warburton, who insisted that it must have led Cicero to the double doctrine, denying as a philosopher what he professed as a magistrate and believing that the soul at death either became extinct or was merged in the τό ἕν from which it came. Ancient philosophy was not capable of thinking otherwise; it could not detach God from the universe or make him otherwise than silent and impassive, capable of neither revelation nor redemption. Warburton does not seem to mention Beausobre, but their views of ancient metaphysics are not unlike. Only Socrates, who rejected the philosophy of nature in favour of the study of man, was capable of a real belief in the life after death, deduced from moral necessity rather than the utility of the state.[76]

The *Divine Legation of Moses* is an uncontrolled mass of writing, which Warburton constantly reworked and re-edited, adding notes in rebuttal of anyone (Middleton, Mosheim) who had criticised him, and left unfinished as his mind began to fail.[77] It is difficult to explore, let alone to summarise, and there are difficulties in deciding what its author had to say about the final questions to which it must lead. Given that the life after death had not been revealed to Moses or known to the Jews, given that it had been imagined by Gentile lawgivers but secretly denied by Gentile philosophers, what was to be said about its final revelation by – some said in – Jesus Christ? Had it been made known simply to restore and perfect human nature, reinforcing the moral law by rendering it eternal?[78] Or was there a new dispensation, a promise not only of the soul's survival but of the body's resurrection, bringing about a new order in eternity, radically discontinuous with the painful and heroic rediscovery of sociability in the Mediterranean cities? This at a time when the need for a civil and sociable religion was keenly felt by those who remembered the seventeenth century. Warburton was not unorthodox on the nature of Christ; his friendship with Middleton did not necessitate doubt of the miracles of the New Testament, and he endowed a lecture series on the fulfilment of prophecy before and after Christ's life on earth, which was to pay particular attention to the book of Revelation and the apostasy of the bishop of Rome.[79] It was possible, as Joseph Priestley was to show, to be at once Socinian,

[76] Ibid., I, pp. 455–6. [77] Ibid., I, p. 53.

[78] The deathbed conversion of the deist Mr Square, in Fielding's *Tom Jones* (vol. VI, book XVIII, ch. iv) is the result of a conviction that only the revealed promise of immortality can ensure morality in this life. See the Modern Library edition (New York, 1985, pp. 925–6 n. 2) for Fielding's connection with the *Divine Legation*.

[79] Warburton, 1837, I, p. 55.

unitarian and millenarian, but Warburton's account of revelation would seem to reinforce orthodoxy. It was Gibbon's decision to say nothing of the Christian revelation which occasioned the controversy over chapters 15 and 16 of the *Decline and Fall*, and we shall find Warburtonian ideas among the arguments of his critics. He and they were aware of Middleton when they discussed the question of miracles, of Warburton when they discussed that of immortality; indeed, Gibbon might not have raised the latter issue but for the *Divine Legation*. It was to be a central question whether Christian values were continuous or discontinuous with those of Greece and Rome, whether divine grace *perficit* or *tollit*, perfected or abolished, human nature and the history of sociability, and the effect of the *Divine Legation* was to render that question more deeply problematic, as a matter of history as well as of belief.

(iv) DAVID HUME: THE PRESENCE OF PHILOSOPHY

Questions of chronology now become pertinent, and it may be well to recall that Warburton began publishing the *Divine Legation* in 1738, eleven years before Middleton's *Free Enquiry*. Returning to Britain from a diplomatic mission, during which his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* had been published in his absence, David Hume was displeased to find English opinion so far caught up in the debate over Middleton's challenge that his own essay on miracles, chapter 10 of the *Enquiry*, was not much noticed.[80] This may have been a growth point for his subsequent conviction that England, if not Scotland, was a land of bigotry and fanaticism, so that the appearance of the *Decline and Fall* in 1776 took him (so he said) by surprise.[81] A more immediate point, however, is that the uproar over Middleton's *Free Enquiry* was a debate within English clerical culture and its lay readerships, conducted in a discourse of controversy with which that culture had long been familiar, but in which Hume's philosophical writings played a challenging but indirect part. The language of sacred and ecclesiastical history had long been established; that of philosophy perhaps (but not certainly) offered to set it aside or abolish it, but did not bring it to a halt. This circumstance is relevant to the ways in which Hume and Gibbon wrote and were read. To approach them by way of Warburton and Middleton is to emphasise the importance of understanding this.

[80] Hume, 'My own life', in Hume, 1985, p. xxxv.
[81] Hume's letters to Gibbon, 1776, in Hume, 1932, II, pp. 309–10.

Hume's first essay directly relevant to religion was 'Of superstition and enthusiasm', published in 1741.[82] The polemic against superstition had for many years been part of that against popery and priestcraft, while that against enthusiasm can be traced in England to the 1650s, when it had been directed against puritans and sectarians claiming direct contact with the Holy Spirit. The prophetic enthusiast believed that God was speaking in, through and to him, and might look for an age of the Spirit in which God would be manifest in all worshippers alike. It was known, however, that there were ways other than the prophetic in which the mind might think itself the mouthpiece of ideas in fact its own; the pantheist for whom matter and spirit were one, the materialist for whom the universe was thinking matter, might equally suppose that, when they thought, the universe was thinking through them. Hume, concerned chiefly with the prophetic enthusiast, explained how the mind mistook its ideas about God for God in the mind, and developed a historical sociology of both enthusiasm and superstition which he was to re-use in his *History of England*[83] some years later. Superstition, the error of seeing God in material objects and social practices, both reinforced civil society by rendering it sacred and generated priests who were the civil magistrate's greatest enemies. In the *History* Hume applied this analysis to Archbishop Laud,[84] but treated him leniently in the light of what arose against him. If superstition was the friend of authority, enthusiasm was the friend of liberty;[85] but while the freedom of the Spirit lasted, the laws of human nature were suspended and anything at all might be attempted. It would not last, however, Hume continued in the essay of 1741; priestcraft once destroyed, nothing would remain but civil society; the mind would subject itself once more to experience, and the heirs of the prophets would be the Quakers, who

> seem to approach nearly the only regular body of *deists* in the universe, the *literati* or disciples of Confucius in China.[86]

A footnote justifies the term 'deists' by explaining that in China there are no clergy and no ecclesiastical establishment. Hume might have known of the Jesuit argument that Chinese religion was originally deist, but subsequently pantheist, Spinozistic and implicitly enthusiastic; he was anxious to deny that early human thought was theist or monotheist. More notably, however, he was not mentioning (if he knew) that Warburton was already proposing an alternative scheme, in which superstition was yoked by the legislator

[82] Hume, 1985, pp. xii n. 5, 73–9. [83] NCG, pp. 209–17. [84] Ibid., pp. 214–15.
[85] Hume, 1985, p. 78. [86] Ibid.

and converted into a religion of state, while philosophy was left to the atheism and enthusiasm of making the mind a manifestation of the τό ἕν. Warburton propounded a complex civil history of ancient religion, leading toward the climax of the Christian revelation. 'Of superstition and enthusiasm' – if considered in isolation from the *History of England* – is less a civil than a natural history; a study of the workings of the human mind.

The essay 'Of miracles', published in 1748 as part of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*,[87] is less a natural history than a study in the rules of historical evidence. Since Hume was important to Gibbon and the belief in miracles one of Gibbon's five causes for the spread of Christianity, it calls for study here; it also illustrates Hume's place in the religious controversies of his time. Hume's argument is initially logical: since a miracle is by definition an event impossible without direct divine intervention, we ought to accept any explanation of it, no matter how improbable, that can be constructed without recourse to that intervention. The inference, as Hume obviously knew, is doubly sceptical; not only is it impossible to verify a miracle by any kind of causal reasoning, but we shall find ourselves accepting causal narratives that may be wildly improbable and in any case cannot be verified by relating causes to effects – a procedure of which Hume was sceptical for a wider set of reasons. These are propositions certain to interest any historian seeking to construct a narrative, and we are at one of the points at which Hume's philosophy obliged him to turn towards the more open discourse of history; histories, however, which must present reasonable accounts of human experience, including the experience of interpreting written accounts of such experience dating from a human past.[88] Here, however, Hume encountered a further set of difficulties, which he could not dismiss and others were already interpreting.

Miracles were authenticating actions, performed to demonstrate the divine mission, authority or character of the person performing them. They were secondary proofs of revelation, since the latter declared itself and its message; what the miracles authenticated was not fully declared by the miracle itself, and might necessitate further discussion of what had been revealed. The ecclesiastical historian must write the history of that discussion; but if a Christian, he was committed to the authenticity of both the revelation and the authenticating miracle. In eighteenth-century England there were few if any prepared to say that the Christian revelation

[87] Hume, 1748 (1977), pp. 72–90. [88] Phillipson, 1989.

was capable of authenticating itself without the support of miracles – that 'the history of the Gospel might be true though the history of the Church was fabulous'. Middleton had used these words because there was a massive body of historical evidence claiming to authenticate miracles, revelation, doctrine and a history of God's actions upon humanity; having embarked on a criticism of one section of that evidence, he had found – and perhaps had not cared – that it was impossible to say how much further he was prepared to go, or to clear himself of the charge that he was willing to go all the way. Hume was prepared to go the full distance, beyond miracles to revelation itself; but he could not replace the latter by a secular history as readily as he had offered to replace the former. There was an enormous amount of sacred history to be disclosed, and unbelief raised problems of its own. Hume made this clear by an obviously ironic account of the relations between belief and evidence.

> Our most holy religion is founded on *Faith*, not on reason; and it is a sure method of exposing it to put it to such a trial, as it is, by no means, fitted to endure.[89]

This could be said by an orthodox Christian, except that such a one would not use the word 'exposed'. Since St Paul it had been possible to say that to accept the divine Word was to share in its divine energy; Hume must decide whether to dismiss this claim as 'enthusiasm', thus dismissing all faith as absurd because outside the limits of reason. The fideist-sceptic option becomes visible, but is rather off Hume's page than on its margin. Faith, then, is given to more than miracles alone, as he makes clear by proceeding to enlarge the meanings of the latter word.

> To make this more evident, let us examine those miracles, related in scripture; and not to lose ourselves in too wide a field, let us confine ourselves to such as we find in the *Pentateuch* –

the wider field being implicitly the New Testament and the miracles of Christ and the Apostles, about whom Hume has little to say –

> which we shall examine . . . not as the word or testimony of God himself, but as the production of a mere human writer and historian

which a true Christian must deny that it was.

> Here then we are first to consider a book, presented to us by a barbarous and ignorant people, written in an age when they were still more barbarous, and in all probability long after the facts which it relates . . . Upon reading this book, we find it full of prodigies and miracles. It gives an account of a state of the world

[89] Hume, 1748, p. 89.

and of human nature entirely different from the present: Of our fall from that state: Of the age of man, extended to near a thousand years: Of the destruction of the world by a deluge: Of the arbitrary choice of one people, as the favourites of heaven; and that people the countrymen of the author: Of their deliverance from bondage by prodigies the most astonishing imaginable: I desire any one to lay his hand upon his heart, and after a serious consideration declare, whether he thinks that the falsehood of such a book, supported by such a testimony, would be more extraordinary and miraculous than all the miracles it relates.[90]

Here 'miracles' have ceased to be acts authenticating a divine mission and become the acts reported of God himself; the central events of a sacred history consisting of those actions. Hume is not saying whether he thinks the authenticity of the history narrated in the New Testament depends upon the authenticity of the Old, but he would almost certainly have said that the same act of faith is necessary to accept the authenticity of the New. The latter, however, presents a different set of problems in historical evidence. It is not the national myth and epic of a barbarous people, but the narrative of a divine revelation of an utterly unprecedented kind, occurring in a complex of civil histories independently documented, narrated and interpreted, and itself generating a documentation and interpretive literature of comparable but profoundly different complexity. When Hume arrived in England in 1748 and found the controversy over Middleton's *Free Enquiry* dismissing his 'Of miracles' to oblivion, he was entering upon a discourse which had been going on for generations among members of a national clerical culture, and in which the debate over the miracles of the Gospel was less a problem for philosophers than part of a many-faceted debate over the history of the Church. It was easier to dismiss Hume as irrelevant to that debate than to see him as undermining its foundations; it is not certain that he intended to take part in it.

Warburton and his lieutenant Richard Hurd were particularly scathing in their insistence that Hume's theory of miracles had been refuted and played no part in the debate after 1749.[91] They may also have played some part in the threat of legal action which led to the exclusion of the essays 'Of suicide' and 'Of the immortality of the soul' from a collection Hume published in 1757;[92] one of the few occasions when he was exposed to something like actual persecution. These essays appeared only after his death, but their contents were not unknown; and since the *Divine Legation*

[90] Ibid., pp. 89–90.

[91] Hurd's life of Warburton contains his account of their response; Warburton, 1837, I, pp. 41–3.

[92] They appear in Hume, 1985, pp. 577–89, 590–8. For their withdrawal see the introduction to the 1977 edition of the *Enquiry*, p. viii.

is a history of immortality and the spread of the concept is one of the five causes in Gibbon's two chapters, it is worth knowing what Hume thought on the subject. The relevant essay begins and ends with assertions that the soul's survival can be known only through revelation,[93] but it is also asserted that the Creator was less than benevolent in withholding this assurance until so late a date.[94] This is one of Hume's objections to the doctrine on moral grounds; on the physical and metaphysical, he observes that to think the soul part of the spiritual substance of the universe leads to conclusions close to pantheism[95] (Spinoza is not mentioned), while to think it material or spatial raises the question where in the universe the souls of the dead could be accommodated.[96] Hume shows some interest in the idea of a plurality of worlds.[97] What is altogether lacking is any recognition of Warburton's complex thesis of the idea of immortality as a cultural and historical product of ancient city civilisation: a moral and political necessity, but a theological and philosophical impossibility. Warburton had achieved a civil history of immortality, which Hume's essays on Christian belief do not attempt.

The Natural History of Religion, one of those Hume succeeded, yet thought he had failed, in publishing in 1757,[98] was of considerable importance to Gibbon and ranks as Hume's major work on the subject, prior to the posthumously published *Dialogues on Natural Religion* (1777).[99] The title of this essay is to be taken seriously; it is a natural, almost a conjectural, and therefore not a civil history, in the sense that it is a study of how the human mind generates religions, written with the minimum of attention to particular historical situations or processes. Herein, once again, it differs from the *Divine Legation*. Hume's insistence that the religion of primitive mankind is invariably polytheism is directed against the Christian belief that post-diluvian humans retained a primitive monotheism until they corrupted it into idolatry, but also pays no attention to Warburton's account of how polytheism accompanied the growth of cities. There is no detailed study of the dialectic between polytheism and philosophy, until we reach the point – underlined by Gibbon in a footnote[100] – where it can be seen that the convergence between acknowledgement of

[93] Hume, 1985, pp. 590, 598. [94] Ibid., p. 593. [95] Ibid., pp. 591–2.
[96] Ibid., p. 597. [97] Ibid., and 1748, p. 68. [98] Hume, 1757 (1995), introduction, pp. vi–x.
[99] It was of the *Dialogues* that Gibbon saw the manuscript before publication; EGLH, pp. 86–7. His approval of its arguments is evidence for the view that he followed Hume beyond deism into scepticism. I am indebted to Nicholas Phillipson for the suggestion that Hugh Blair, a close friend of Hume, perceived the Humean underpinnings of Gibbon's narrative, and drew from this his conclusion that Gibbon was 'attacking religion'.
[100] DF, 1, ch. 8, n. 24; Womersley, 1994, 1, p. 220n.

one God and the making of philosophical statements about him is the necessary cause of both intolerance and toleration;[101] a point, as we have seen, at which Christians arrived with the minimum of Enlightened assistance. The *Natural History* strongly foreshortens actual history; the monotheism of the (unmentioned) Jews forms 'no objection worth regarding' to the generalisation that 'about 1700 years ago all mankind were idolaters',[102] and 'our ancestors in Europe, before the revival of letters' believed in 'fairies, goblins, elves, sprights' surrounding the one Creator[103] – possibly a version of Middleton's belief that Christian saints were ancient daemons baptised. We are reading a natural or philosophical history of religion, ancient and Christian, in which theses about the workings of the human mind offer to criticise and sometimes replace the narratives and documents which the history of practice has laid down and left as records of itself. But Jesus Christ had been born under Caesar Augustus and suffered under Pontius Pilate. These were datable moments in a civil history of Roman empire, Greek philosophy and Jewish law and covenant, converging at a moment of revelation after which the Church began to document and interpret a historical narrative of its own. There was a sacred and ecclesiastical historiography on which philosophy might comment destructively, but which it could not yet replace by a historiography of its own.

Into this field Hume cannot be said to have entered;[104] but Gibbon – deeply indebted to the *Natural History of Religion*, and in all probability following Hume's philosophy beyond deism into scepticism – was committed, by his enterprise at large and by his decision to write on the history of the early Church, to embark on the study of which John Jortin had warningly written:

> Ecclesiastical History is a sort of enchanted land, where it is hard to distinguish truth from false appearances, and a maze which requires more than Ariadne's clue.[105]

Such was the world of clerical scholarship. Jortin wrote as a curious rather than critical believer. Gibbon, who was neither, would be denounced as a philosopher for venturing there, but as a historian would find it irresistibly attractive.

[101] Hume, 1757 (1995), pp. 60–1, 64–71: 'so sociable is polytheism', p. 62.
[102] Ibid., p. 2. [103] Ibid., p. 24.
[104] The only attention paid to Christian doctrine in the *Natural History* occurs in a long footnote (pp. 99–102) quoting the unorthodox Chevalier Ramsay, where a rejection of predestination comes close to a rejection of the Atonement.
[105] Jortin, 1805, 1, p. 165.

CHAPTER 8

Gibbon's fifteenth chapter: the spread of Christianity and the rise of the clergy

(I) THE PROBLEMS OF THE TWO CHAPTERS

The language in which Gibbon introduces his history of Christianity before Constantine is also the language which offended his Christian readers and has established his reputation as a hero of irreligious Enlightenment. It occurs just after the opening of chapter 15 and is repeated here.

> Our curiosity is naturally prompted to inquire by what means the Christian faith obtained so remarkable a victory over the established religions of the earth. To this inquiry, an obvious but satisfactory answer may be returned; that it was owing to the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself, and to the ruling providence of its great Author. But as truth and reason seldom find so favourable a reception in the world, and as the wisdom of Providence frequently condescends to use the passions of the human heart, and the general circumstances of mankind, as instruments to execute its purpose; we may still be permitted, though with becoming submission, to ask, not indeed what were the first, but what were the secondary causes of the rapid growth of the Christian Church. It will, perhaps, appear, that it was most effectually favoured and assisted by the five following causes: I. The inflexible, and, if we may use the expression, the intolerant zeal of the Christians, derived, it is true, from the Jewish religion, but purified from the narrow and unsocial spirit, which instead of inviting, had deterred the Gentiles from embracing the law of Moses. II. The doctrine of a future life, improved by every additional circumstance which could give weight and efficacy to that important truth. III. The miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive church. IV. The pure and austere morals of the Christians. V. The union and discipline of the Christian republic, which gradually formed an independent and increasing state in the heart of the Roman empire.[1]

It is possible to analyse this passage in detail, enquiring where it is and is not conformable to Christian ecclesiastical history, and how far and by what means Gibbon intended to press his departure from the latter. Hugh Blair's question, however, which dominates the approach made in this volume, raises a double problem. Assuming that Gibbon intended an

[1] Womersley, 1994, I, p. 446 (vol. I hereafter cited in this chapter by page only). See above, p. 8.

'attack' on orthodoxy, by what means did he pursue the latter – what was he attacking and how? – and what relation does it bear to the purposes he was pursuing in writing his history of the Roman empire? Blair thought there was no such relation, and that the attack on orthodoxy was a mistake. When we examine the responses to the two chapters, we shall find them including the assertion – continuing to the present day – that these chapters are the key to the *Decline and Fall* as a whole, and disclose the purposes with which it was written. Blair questioned this assumption, but – like the critics of the two chapters, and indeed like Gibbon himself – it was a problem for him that Gibbon's history had not been written yet, and that to judge it by those chapters was (and is) to say the least proleptic. The present volume of *Barbarism and Religion* is consequently obliged to study chapters 15 and 16, asking what Gibbon was saying and doing in them and how they reveal and further the purposes of his history, before turning to the controversy they provoked and how the latter determined the immediate and persistent reading of the *Decline and Fall* as well as its writing. The seeds of that controversy, however, are to be seen at the outset of the text of the two chapters, and it is necessary to study their controversial character concurrently with their historiographical (assuming some distinction between the two).

Gibbon's language just quoted offers to study the spread of the Christian religion, while admitting that this question entails that of its truth, or the perception of its truth. Implicit in the passage quoted is the question whether the Christian religion was revealed by God in the person of Christ and spread through the inherent force of that revelation, considered as an act rather than a doctrine. Gibbon was held to have slighted that possibility, and thereby denied it, by the words in which this passage speaks of the primary cause; in acknowledging it, he had done so inadequately, intending to dismiss it and leave the secondary causes to operate without it as secular processes. To understand this criticism, and to determine how far Gibbon may have been pursuing the intentions it attributed to him, we need to understand the Christian ecclesiastical historiography of the time, and how it went about presenting its character as a revelation.

Gibbon had stated the primary cause or causes of the spread of Christianity as 'the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself, and the ruling providence of its great author'. Gibbon's singular replaces the more usual plural: the 'evidences for Christianity', on which there existed a considerable literature. By mentioning them and then saying no more, Gibbon was held to have implied his disbelief, and it was further held that his five secondary causes denied some of them and offered secular explanations

of others. Before proceeding, it may be well to see what the 'evidences' in question were. There is an admirable statement of them in the writings of John Jortin, an affable[2] and moderate divine recently deceased,[3] which were known to Gibbon and praised by him.

Let us now sum up briefly, and in few words, the main evidences of the truth of our religion.

1. Christ was foretold by the prophets. Of the things predicted concerning him, some were miraculous, some improbable, some seemingly irreconcilable, and all of them beyond the reach of human conjecture; and yet in him they all centred, and were united and reconciled. To this must be added the amazing harmony, analogy, and correspondence between the Old and New Testaments, not only in the direct prophecies, but in the types, rites, ceremonies, and events contained in the former, and fulfilled in a sublimer sense in the latter, which upon the whole could never be the effect of blind chance.

   The Old and New Testaments confirm each other; the prophetic parts of the former support the Gospel, and the miracles and prophecies of Christ and his apostles support the Old Testament.
2. Christ knew the hearts of men, as he showed upon all occasions; a knowledge which Almighty God represents in Scripture as so peculiar to himself that he cannot be supposed to suffer those to partake of it who are not sent by him.
3. He was a prophet: he foretold not only things remote, and lying beyond human sagacity, but things improbable and miraculous, which have been accomplished.
4. He wrought miracles numerous and various, worthy of himself, and beneficial to men: and many of these miracles were prophecies at the same time, and indications of future events; and so were most of his parables.
5. He never erred or failed in any point, as teacher, prophet, Messias, or worker of miracles. All his promises were accomplished, particularly his remarkable promise that he would support and comfort all those who should be called to suffer and die for his sake; which hath been illustriously fulfilled in antient and in modern martyrs.
6. He conferred miraculous and prophetic gifts on his disciples, and they on theirs.
7. His religion was plain and popular, yet pure and holy, and tending to make men wiser and better, and it produced a multitude of good effects in the world.
8. When it was first preached, it could never have made its way without the assistance of miracles.

[2] With the exception of an allusion to Spinoza which runs: 'Yet has this cloudy and absurd philosopher found admirers and disciples, who have followed him, as they say the tiger follows the rhinoceros, to eat his excrements' (Jortin, 1805, I, p. 251n).

[3] In 1770; Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1230. He had written a life of Erasmus, whom Gibbon considered 'the father of rational theology' (DF, IV, ch. 47, n. 38). Gibbon owned his *Remarks on Ecclesiastical History*, 1767 (*Library*, p. 163).

9. He lived and died as an example of all that he taught, of all active and suffering virtues.
10. He had no rival or antagonist, to make his authority appear doubtful, by opposing prophecies to his prophecies, and miracles to his miracles, from the time that they began his ministry to this day.

    It cannot be supposed that there should be any deceit in this complicated evidence, and that falsehood should boast of all the imaginable characters of truth.[4]

Such are Jortin's 'convincing evidences of the doctrine', representative of many statements of the kind that will have been known to Gibbon. These, and others like them, Gibbon mentions at the outset of chapter 15, and does not list again. His adversaries supposed that he was denying them by ignoring them, and that his list of five 'secondary' causes was intended to take their place. It is therefore important to see how Gibbon's tabulation intersects with Jortin's. The latter's emphasis on prophetic verification of Christ's mission – he ranks prophecies above miracles[5] – finds little counterpart in Gibbon, except when the latter comes to deal with the authenticity of the book of Revelation. This is a remarkable circumstance, which has escaped notice. Trinitarians and anti-Trinitarians joined in the study of prophecy with the greatest intellects of the period,[6] as we shall see Gibbon's critics doing. It is worth enquiring why Gibbon did not list it among his five causes, and why his neglect of it escaped censure. Jortin was one of those who had delivered the lectures on prophecy endowed by Warburton;[7] in which the Apocalypse was made to foretell the anti-Christian papacy; there is a footnote alluding to this in chapter 15.[8] Miracles come after prophecy in Jortin's scheme, but their role is still essential; Christ's message, and that of the prophets before him, is still so challenging to the human sense of probability that miracles were needed to bring conviction of its truth. Here the Christian intellect challenges Hume directly: it is precisely because miracles are beyond probability that they are to be believed – *quia impossibile* – and the same is true of the doctrine to which they testify. But just what is that doctrine? Christ is a being so unique that he has had no rivals or imitators – Simon Magus and Apollonius of Tyana are eliminated by Jortin's tenth evidence – but when we ask who and what he was, the answer seems to lessen his uniqueness and his challenge. His

[4] Jortin, 1805, II, pp. 17–19.
[5] For Jortin's account of prophecy, and its difficult and nearly enthusiastic language, see ibid., I, pp. 265–6 (quoted from Bishop Chandler), 275–6. On the nature of miracles, II, pp. 2–13 (p. 8: 'The miracles of Christ were prophecies at the same time'), 16–17 (those performed by the Apostles).
[6] Force, 1985; note the preface by Richard Popkin.
[7] Above, p. 236.
[8] DF, I, ch. 15, n. 67.

doctrine was plain and simple, and has done much good in the world; he has ceased to defy all reason by redeeming men from their sins. There is hesitation between revelation and reason. On an earlier page Jortin speaks of

> one vast and consistent plan of Providence, extending itself from the creation to the consummation of all things, to establish a system of belief, hope, and practice, plain and useful, being no other than the Religion of Nature, improved and enforced, revealed in part to the Jews, provided by the prophets, and tending to destroy four great moral evils, so prevalent and so pernicious; – atheism, scepticism, superstitious idolatry, and vice.[9]

This is close to Christian deism; Christ does little more than reinforce natural morality by the promise of immortality. To this he no doubt testifies by his death and resurrection; but these are not mentioned here or among the listed evidences, and are in any case not other in Jortin's system than miracles signifying a supernatural reinforcement of the religion of nature. The more Christ becomes a divine messenger, arriving at a determinate moment in a history both sacred and moral, the more he needs evidence and the less is he evidence in himself. The fulfilment of prophecy is never quite the equivalent of the 'foolishness' of the Pauline Word, confounding both Jews and Greeks by its sheer unexpectedness. And if we ask what 'part' of religion was not 'revealed to the Jews', the answer must surely be the personal immortality proclaimed by Warburton, of whom[10] and of which Jortin does not speak in these passages. It now becomes noteworthy that of Gibbon's five causes, the second is the doctrine of immortality and the third the belief in miracles. The five, however, must be studied in the order in which he gives them, and their impact on the doctrine of revelation weighed.

(ii) the five causes: monotheism and the origins of enthusiasm

The first secondary cause named in chapter 15 is 'the inflexible, and, if we may use the expression, the intolerant zeal of the Christians', and the noun (itself notable) is qualified by two adjectives, of which the second, though tentative, is the more significant. Gibbon opens with what by now is a familiar account of the universe of polytheism: a vast and expandable

[9] Jortin, 1805, ii, p. 7. Jortin's 'provided' seem to mean 'foretold'.

[10] Warburton is mentioned as a friend on ibid., ii, p. 278, Middleton on p. 347, Warburton and Hoadly as friends on p. 364.

republic of gods, each supported by myth rather than doctrine, so that no intellectual disagreement can arise, and though the adjective 'tolerant' may be applied in this culture, it would be truer to say that it is inapplicable since the problem of toleration has not yet arisen. Warburton and Mosheim, to name no other historians, had preceded Gibbon in giving this account. There is a single group of dissentients from this cosmopolis: the Jews, worshippers of a single god and denying recognition to all others. Gibbon goes on to describe (and to exaggerate) the 'unsocial spirit' of a people who 'refused to join in the common intercourse of mankind'.[11] All religions are cultic, and form part of the manners and institutions of civil society; the Jewish is no exception, but its refusal to join in the observances of any other means that the Jews – especially after their expansion beyond Palestine to live in other cities of the empire – not only refuse to share the manners of any other people, but, says Gibbon with a vehemence we find deeply ominous for the future, hate and despise the rest of the human race.[12] He elaborates this theme to an extent which carries him some if not all of the way towards Voltaire's indiscriminate loathing of all Jews ancient and modern; and like some Christian writers before him, remarks on the apparent paradox that, after constantly backsliding into the worship of false gods while they had kingdoms of their own, they became fanatical literalists and ritualists under the Exile, the Second Temple and the Diaspora. His immediate source here is the Huguenot historian Jacques Basnage, a friend of Pierre Bayle whose *Histoire des juifs*[13] began where Josephus had left off and continued to a point near the time at which it was written.

Gibbon has begun exploring the history, even the prehistory, of both tolerance and intolerance; a theme which will recur when he addresses the history of persecution in chapter 16. 'According to the maxims of universal toleration, the Romans protected a superstition which they despised';[14] we may ask once more how far toleration can be separated from contempt.[15] Warburton and others had emphasised that the Romans were politically tolerant in the sense that their laws extended protection to any religion not considered a danger to the state, and doctrinally tolerant for the reason that few religions raised questions of doctrine at all. Cultic observances differing

[11] P. 447. It is here (ch. 15, n. 3, p. 448) that Gibbon cites Maimonides to the effect that a Jew is not obliged to rescue a Gentile from drowning. This seems to be correct (Yale Judaica Series, vol. IX, p. 208). Thanks to Kenneth Moss for help with this reference.

[12] P. 448.

[13] Basnage, 1706 (there is an English translation by Thomas Taylor dated 1708). *Library*, p. 64, attributes this work to Henri Basnage de Beauval, the author's brother, and this is followed by Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1195. Gibbon owned an edition of 1716.

[14] P. 448. [15] Mankin, 1996.

from those of Rome were considered superstitious, and in the eyes of the increasingly Epicurean elites, philosophy pronounced all religions to be of that character.

But though the worship of the Temple was a 'superstition' in the eyes of the Romans, connected with a system of manners unreconciled with any other people, it was something other than a 'superstition' in a sense becoming known to Gibbon's readers. We sense the presence of David Hume, although his essays are not quoted in these chapters. Superstition is the religion of civil society, and in a polytheist world becomes the universal religion. To Romans, if the Jews chose to worship an empty sanctum without images, that was their superstition; if it cut them off from sharing the manners of other nations, that was their affair and presented the empire with nothing worse than a police problem. In a Humean analysis, however, the worship of the radically invisible begins to suggest enthusiasm, the worship of the godhead in the ideas one has formed about it; and these ideas, believed to be the presence of God in the mind thinking of him, will generate an energy that while it lasts cuts the believer free from all the laws and manners of civil society. Gibbon does not use – it is a temptation to say that he avoids – the word 'enthusiasm' in this section; but the word 'zeal' has made its appearance and is used[16] in explaining how the Jews became the only people in pre-Christian antiquity capable of fanaticism. Their religion is still ritual, which sets limits to their enthusiasm, but they are fanatical in their refusal of intercommunity with others. This characteristic drives them to rebellion (and the horrors of terrorism and revolution recounted by Josephus), which the Romans put down with their usual near-genocidal brutality; but once the Temple has been destroyed and the Jews exiled from Jerusalem, the 'superstitions' peculiar to them as a people are tolerated once more. If these cut them off from the intercourse of mankind, that is their affair; the more so as their contempt for other peoples means that they do not proselytise among them. Gibbon spends several pages on this point,[17] because it is about to introduce the unique characteristic, as he desires to present it, of Christianity as the successor to Judaism.

> This inflexible perseverance, which appeared so odious or so ridiculous to the ancient world, assumes a more awful character, since Providence has deigned to reveal to us the mysterious history of the chosen people.[18]

Here is one of not a few passages in which Gibbon's tone seems to intimate but not announce unbelief; but we need also to enquire just what is meant

[16] P. 448. [17] Pp. 449–51. [18] Pp. 448–9.

by his use of the term 'Providence'. It seems here to indicate not its technical use, denoting the mysteries of history as viewed by the believing mind, so much as that almost personal agency that conveys revelation by means of Scripture and interpretation. The 'history of the chosen people' is 'awful' and 'mysterious' because it has been revealed as the necessary antecedent or antetype of the Christian revelation, and among the mysteries is the tragic refusal of the chosen people to recognise the new revelation. The Jews cannot accept Christ as their Messiah or their history as prophetic of his coming; but since he came as a Jew[19] and claimed to be that Messiah – in a sense both prophesied and unrecognised – the Christians are obliged to annex the old dispensation and transform it into the forerunner of the new. This is an enormous interpretative labour, and one of the meanings of the term 'mysterious' in Gibbon's sentence is that the Christians made Judaism prophetic by reading it esoterically, as antetype and allegory. In annexing it they accepted it; yet it matters more that they transcended it.

> Under these circumstances, Christianity offered itself to the world, armed with the strength of Mosaic law, and delivered from the weight of its fetters . . . The divine authority of Moses and the prophets was admitted, and even established, as the firmest basis of Christianity. From the beginning of the world an uninterrupted series of predictions had announced and prepared the long-expected coming of the Messiah, who, in compliance with the gross apprehensions of the Jews, had been more frequently represented under the character of a King and Conqueror, than under that of a Prophet, a Martyr, and the Son of God.

Gibbon's version of the *praeparatio evangelica* might be thought to do less than justice to Isaiah.

> By his expiatory sacrifice

which Gibbon does not often mention

> the imperfect sacrifices of the temple were at once consummated and abolished . . . The promise of divine favour, instead of being partially confined to the posterity of Abraham, was universally proposed to the freeman and the slave, to the Greek and to the barbarian, to the Jew and to the Gentile.[20]

This world-altering change occurs because Gentiles are admitted to a sacred history hitherto Jewish, and because a transforming mission to the Jews has now become, without ceasing to be such, a Mission to the Gentiles. The decision to make this extension was recorded in canonical history, and it seems to be a determination on Gibbon's part to say nothing of the acts of

[19] DF, 1, ch. 15, n. 16; p. 452. [20] P. 451.

the Apostles which prevents his narrating it as the crucial moment in the earliest Christian history. It unquestionably plays that role in his thought, for it will explain how the Christians, unlike the Jews, become a universal and revolutionary force.

> The enfranchisement of the Church from the bonds of the synagogue was a work, however, of some time and some difficulty.[21]

Gibbon's narrative of this process is centred upon 'the church of Jerusalem', the *ecclesia Hierosolymitana* of such importance to Mosheim;[22] and it is here that he cites the *De Rebus ante Constantinum Magnum* and remarks:

> In this masterly performance, which I shall often have occasion to quote, he enters much more fully into the state of the primitive church than he has an opportunity of doing in his General History.[23]

But he acknowledges Mosheim's authority at the very point at which he departs from it. Mosheim had depicted the church of Jerusalem in two ways: first, as the seat of that simple congregationalism, under the guidance rather than the authority of the Apostles, from which the Church departed only as it began to spread – this will recur in Gibbon; second, as a heterogeneous assemblage of converts both Jewish and Gentile, uncertain what of their former practices they must give up and none too clear as to the meaning of the faith to which they had been converted.[24] In this setting confused and even malignant doctrines could arise, and Mosheim, who thought of the Second Temple as a period of cultural hybridity, in which both Greek and Iranian philosophies had entered into Jewish religion, was prepared (like Hammond and Le Clerc before him) to concede that what was known as gnosticism had Jewish as well as Gentile origins. There is no hint of this in Gibbon. He presents the church of Jerusalem as made up of Jews who had accepted Christianity, but were unwilling to concede that Christ had superseded or abolished Mosaic law (chiefly the ceremonial). He rehearses their arguments against this position with evident sympathy, and in a footnote mentions both the 'great ingenuity' of Isaac de Orobio and the 'equal ingenuity and candour' of Philippus van Limborch in their *Amica Collatio* ('it well deserves that name') on the subject in 1684.[25] The text, however, shows how easily tolerance and generosity could slide into indifference and irony.

> [T]he industry of our learned divines has abundantly explained the ambiguous language of the Old Testament, and the ambiguous conduct of the apostolic

[21] P. 452. [22] Above, pp. 189–91. [23] DF, I, ch. 15, n. 18; p. 453.
[24] Above, p. 192. [25] DF, ch. 15, n. 15; p. 452.

teachers. It was proper gradually to unfold the system of the Gospel, and to pronounce with the utmost caution and tenderness a sentence of condemnation so repugnant to the inclination and prejudices of the believing Jews.[26]

The church of Jerusalem remains to the end 'Nazarene'; that is, Christian in belief, Jewish in observance of the Mosaic law. This character survives the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and is terminated only under Hadrian, when the congregation is induced to adopt a Latin bishop and what are by then non-Mosaic rituals.[27] Gibbon does not fail to observe that just as Jewish converts had been intolerant of the Gentile rejection of ritual law ('with the approbation of their peculiar Apostle'), so Gentile converts refused to tolerate the former's retention of it.[28] This is not mere condemnation; the new religion raises new problems, unknown to either Jewish or Gentile antiquity.

On the origins of heresy, Gibbon differs increasingly and radically from his guide Mosheim. There are several paragraphs on the fate of the Nazarenes or Judeo-Christians, caught in the widening gap between the two religions;[29] but 'Ebionite' is merely the synonym of 'Nazarene',[30] and there is no hint here either that Jews who accepted Christ as the Messiah might think him no more than a man, or on the contrary that Jews infected by eastern philosophy might separate Jesus from the aeonic Christ and figure among the originators of gnosticism. We hear nothing of Cerinthus or (in this chapter) the Apostle John. When the subject of gnosticism is introduced, it is represented as merely an attempt by Gentile Christians, Syrian or Egyptian,[31] to divorce Christianity entirely from any *praeparatio* in the Old Testament. Gibbon's language becomes Voltairean.

The conquest of the land of Canaan, and the extirpation of the unsuspecting natives, they were at a loss how to reconcile with the common notions of humanity and justice. But when they recollected the sanguinary list of murders, of executions, and of massacres, which stain almost every page of the Jewish annals, they acknowledged that the barbarians of Palestine had exercised as much compassion towards their idolatrous enemies as they had ever shown to their friends or countrymen.[32]

The God of Israel was impiously represented by the Gnostics as being liable to passion and to error, capricious in his favour, implacable in his resentment, meanly jealous of his superstitious worship, and confining his partial providence[33]

[26] Ibid. [27] P. 454. [28] P. 453. [29] P. 455. [30] Pp. 454–5. [31] Pp. 457–8.
[32] P. 456; cf NCG, pp. 109–10.
[33] Note the lower-case initial; the capital is used when Providence is Christian.

to a single people, and to this transitory life. In such a character they could discover none of the features of the wise and omnipotent Father of the universe[34]

in whom Gibbon was surely aware that gnostics did not believe. Lastly and revealingly:

The most learned of the fathers, by a very singular condescension, have imprudently admitted the sophistry of the Gnostics. Acknowledging that the literal sense is repugnant to every principle of faith as well as reason, they deem themselves secure and invulnerable behind the ample veil of allegory, which they carefully spread over every tender part of the Mosaic dispensation.[35]

We are looking at a signal example of Gibbon's employment of language identical with that of the Voltairean deist he was not, which might easily convince readers less acute than Hugh Blair that he was, in the latter's words, 'attacking religion'. But what is absent from his page, the thesis to which he supplies only the antithesis, is not some orthodox defence of the continuity between the two Testaments, but the detailed and argued history of gnosticism presented by Beausobre and Mosheim, the authors he praises, salutes as his guides, and cites in footnotes to these very passages. Gibbon does not give sources for his account of the gnostic critique, and in representing it as nothing more than a desire to root out the Jewish origins of Christianity, he is abandoning the history of gnosticism he must have read in his masters, in which it is a denial of creation as well as incarnation, the product of a philosophy based on a universal inability to comprehend the creation of matter. There is a sentence which shows he knows this.[36] It would be to reduce Gibbon's stature as a historian to say that he thought, as Voltaire might, this history too ridiculous to deserve attention. He had read, praised and carefully studied historians who knew why it was important, and in his earlier chapter on the religion of the Persians had begun to probe its origins.[37] Lastly, Mosheim would have told him why the Christian resort to allegory – when aimed less at reconciling the Old Testament with the New than at reconciling the latter with hermetic philosophy – was a disaster, pointing to monasticism in the long run and neo-Platonism in the short.[38] It is hard not to read his account of gnosticism as deliberately reductive and shallow; but the sidelining of gnosticism was a practice long established in Christian historiography.

There is more, however, to say on this subject. The gnostics, 'the most polite, the most learned, and the most wealthy of the Christian name',[39]

[34] Pp. 456–7. [35] P. 457. [36] DF, 1, ch. 15, n. 29; p. 457. [37] DF, 1, ch. 8; BSE, ch. 2.
[38] Above, pp. 208–9. [39] P. 457.

persisted for several centuries, during which they did indeed 'blend with the faith of Christ many sublime but obscure tenets, which they derived from oriental philosophy, and even from the religion of Zoroaster'[40] – it is Beausobre's synthesis, which Gibbon still omits to follow. During this period they divided into their principal schools and produced many apocryphal gospels; their 'success was rapid and extensive', and though ultimately repressed, 'they contributed to assist rather than to retard the progress of Christianity'. The reason was their rejection of Judaism.

> The Gentile converts, whose strongest objections and prejudices were directed against the law of Moses, could find admission into many Christian societies, which required not from their untutored mind any belief of an antecedent revelation. Their faith was insensibly fortified and enlarged, and the Church was ultimately benefited by the conquests of its most inveterate enemies.[41]

But the antecedent revelation has persisted. It is essential to Gibbon's argument that Christianity has not rejected Judaism but annexed it from the Jews themselves, and has remained based on a *praeparatio evangelica* that unites the Old Testament with the New; and though he has little to say here on how this has been effected, something more than allegorical interpretation is required to maintain the claim that Jesus Christ came to fulfil – and at the same time transform – what was written by the prophets. The Judaic character of Christianity survives the Mission to the Gentiles and is imparted to them.

The origins of heresy, which we might expect to be important to the critical historian of orthodoxy, are taking second place to the theme of this part of the chapter: the continuation among the Christians of the exclusive monotheism derived from the Jews. Gibbon goes on to say that Ebionites, gnostics and 'orthodox' Christians – orthodoxy is not defined but left to be inferred – were at one in their belief that the many gods of the pagans were not the absurd fictions they might appear to a 'philosopher' – clearly Cicero rather than Plotinus – but real and active demons. The origins of this belief are not explained, and do not appear to be Jewish. We hear instead of a fall of the angels, after which the degraded spirits assume godlike form.[42] No Satan or Lucifer is mentioned, but there has been a footnote in which Gibbon prefers Milton's account of the Syrian deities to that given by John Selden, against whom he seems to have conceived a prejudice.[43] This was not the choice before the learned enquirer into the myth of the angelic fall; Gibbon might have employed the accounts given by

[40] P. 458. [41] P. 459. [42] Ibid.
[43] DF, I, ch. 15, n. 9; p. 449. For Gibbon on Selden, see Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1260.

Beausobre and others of the origins of demonology, in which these beings become the lower angels or personified powers of inferior creation, either malignant or merely imperfect, and arranged in hierarchies sometimes gnostic and sometimes neo-Platonist.[44] He had alluded indirectly to this in the mention of the neo-Platonists at the end of chapter 13, but here we see again how frequently he turns away from his acknowledged masters in composing chapters 15 and 16. Christianity is post-Judaic and philosophy more Roman than Alexandrian.

The demonisation of the gods has momentous consequences. The Christians, it might seem, are as superstitious in fearing the gods as the pagans are in worshipping them; but that is only the beginning. Gibbon goes on:

> The religion of the nations [the *gentes* or Gentiles] was not merely a speculative doctrine professed in the schools or preached in the temples. The innumerable deities and rites of polytheism were closely interwoven with every circumstance of business or pleasure, of public or private life; and it seemed impossible to escape the observance of them, without, at the same time, renouncing the commerce of mankind, and all the offices and amusements of society.[45]

Polytheism is the religion of civil society, just as superstition is; it brings the Mediterranean ancients close to the utopian condition of the Chinese, who simply worship their civil customs without troubling to mythologise them. Every civil institution and social custom has its god, from the authority of the magistrate to the sneezing of the citizen,[46] but the combination of monotheism and demonology obliges the Christians to crusade against each and every one of them. As Gibbon holds forth on the ubiquity and universality of these obligations, he is laying the foundations for the explanation of persecution to be given in chapter 16. The pattern of his thought is Humean, but he is saying nothing not well understood by Mosheim and Warburton before him,[47] Christians who did not regard religion as a social phenomenon requiring analysis. It was as clear to them as to Gibbon how the Christians came to be condemned as atheists – they denied every god known to humans other than Jews – and as enemies of the human race; in denying the gods they denied human society. Gibbon will go on to join the Christian historians in explaining how a fellowship in belief – the Christians will call it a fellowship in Christ – makes their religion profoundly social and compatible with the 'commerce of mankind'; but

[44] Above, pp. 76–7, 149, 200–3.
[45] P. 460. To preach a doctrine in the temples was to give speculation practical and political consequences.
[46] Pp. 460–2; DF, 1, ch. 15, n. 48. [47] Above, pp. 190–1.

he is not going to deny that it entails a total transformation of the divine basis on which society rests. The Jews were rebels, but the Christians are revolutionaries; they invite and command all mankind to join them in crusading against all the gods who have held empire and society together, and then in substituting another.

The Humean analysis now asserts itself.

> The superstitious observances of public or private rites were carelessly practised, from education and habit, by the followers of the established religion. But, as often as they occurred, they afforded the Christians an opportunity of declaring and confirming their zealous opposition. By these frequent protestations their attachment to the faith was continually fortified; and in proportion to the increase of zeal, they combated with the more ardour and success in the holy war which they had undertaken against the empire of the daemons.[48]

Superstition is philosophically contemptible, but it is the cement of civil society; only social habit may keep it going, but this habit may outlast all revolutions. What may replace it while the revolutions last is enthusiasm; the worship of one's own beliefs, which liberates one from all the restraints of civil society and the restraints of one's own social nature. Hume's insistence that enthusiasm temporarily suspended the ordinary functioning of the human mind looks toward the Christian question whether *gratia tollit* or *perficit naturam*; and we have seen the Christian historians insisting that the spread of Christianity was the spread of a message superseding the ordinary promptings of nature. The 'foolishness of the Word', then, has become 'enthusiasm': the revolutionary effects of believing in such a word; and it must further be asked whether the Christians have not bound themselves to enthusiasm by proclaiming a Word that denies all superstition and so all society. At the end of Gibbon's consideration of the first of his five secondary causes, he is using the word 'zeal', not the word 'enthusiasm'; but the 'zeal' feeds upon a 'holy war' whose objectives are without limit and must end in either the destruction of society or its transformation. Hume is sure that modern sociability will regularly, if always provisionally, prevail. Gibbon meanwhile has explained the zeal of the victors in the immediate struggle, not the collapse of the old religions of ancient sociability. Defeat has causes of its own.

Gibbon's critics were to complain that he had emphasised the backslidings of the Jews, but not the covenant to which they returned. Nor had he chosen the prophets of the Exile as marking the moment when their failure could be remedied only by the coming of a Messiah. He had

[48] P. 463. These sentences conclude Gibbon's account of the 'first cause'.

derided the typological and allegorical devices by which Christians made the Old Testament foretell the New; and by shifting his emphasis from Israel to Rome, had begun constructing a philosophical history of Christianity which replaced sacred history without actually refuting it. For this he was to be constantly accused of deism; but it could also be argued that his historiographic enterprise did not necessitate an 'attack on religion', whether or not he had made the mistake of launching one.

(iii) immortality, revelation and eschatology

As chapter 15 moves through the second to fourth causes of the spread of Christianity, Gibbon moves away from the historians who have established the central themes of ecclesiastical history. One of them, Mosheim, will return and be faithfully followed when Gibbon considers his fifth cause, but for the present our concern is with the intervening causes and the question whether they possess thematic unity. The second cause is unlike the others, in that the authors of ecclesiastical history have not made it one of their central themes; Warburton, however, has done so. It is the belief in personal immortality, which Gibbon presents as nowhere generally understood or adopted until the Christians proclaimed it as a truth revealed. It was unrecognised, he says, by ancient philosophy; but in order to say this he must define that philosophy selectively.

> The writings of Cicero represent in the most lively colours the ignorance, the errors, and the uncertainty of the ancient philosophers with regard to the immortality of the soul.

A footnote lists these writings and says that they

> contain, in the most beautiful language, everything that Grecian philosophy or Roman good sense could possibly suggest on this dark but important [sub]ject.[49]

Gibbon is showing a tendency to make 'philosophy' more Roman than Greek, more practical than speculative, and more sceptical than metaphysical. He will begin with Cicero when he can, rather than follow the intellectual genealogies of Diogenes Laertius, Stanley or even Brucker, and thus bypass the *historia ecclesiastica*'s insistence that the Mission to the Gentiles, from its apostolic beginnings, entailed a confrontation with *philosophia* and *gnōsis*. He continues to evade Le Clerc, Beausobre and Mosheim even as he continues to cite them, but his concern is now with the history of a

[49] DF, I, ch. 15, n. 51; p. 463. The text appears to contain an error: 'object'.

belief in immortality which he relegates to the sphere of revelation. 'A few sages of Greece and Rome', he continues, intoxicated by admiration for the powers of intellect, desired to endow mind with independence from matter, and employed 'the science, or rather the language, of Metaphysics' to do this. 'The philosophers who trod in the footsteps of Plato' – Gibbon does not here distinguish between Academics and Alexandrians – went so far as to assert

> not only the future immortality, but the past eternity of the human soul, which they were too apt to consider as a portion of the infinite and self-existing spirit which pervades and sustains the universe.[50]

Beausobre is named as authority for the statement that this doctrine was adopted by 'many of the Greek and Latin Fathers';[51] but it is Warburton's τό ἕν, and a footnote reference to the *Divine Legation* follows on the next page.[52] The tone of this reference is dismissive, though Gibbon seems to be endorsing Warburton's thesis that the doctrine of personal survival cannot be demonstrated through the endeavours of philosophy to do so, and can only be known by a revelation withheld from the ancient Jews. But here he remarks:

> We might naturally expect that a principle so essential to religion would have been revealed in the clearest terms to the chosen people of Palestine, and that it might safely have been entrusted to the hereditary priesthood of Aaron. It is incumbent on us to adore the mysterious dispensations of Providence, when we discover that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is omitted in the law of Moses; it is darkly insinuated by the prophets; and during the long period which elapsed between the Egyptian and the Babylonian servitudes, the hopes as well as fears of the Jews appear to have been confined within the narrow compass of the present life.[53]

The tone again is ironic, and we might infer from it that Gibbon is implying doubt regarding Warburton's real argument: that a promise of immortality and life with God in another world was unknown until it was revealed by and in Jesus Christ. The passage quoted gestures towards Warburton's Christian critics, who found it hard to believe that this promise had been withheld from God's people under the Old Dispensation. Their position left them somewhat closer to holding that Christ had come rather to perfect than to replace the religion and morality existing before him; but Gibbon's partial alignment with Warburton undermines even that. Critics of his two chapters might well suspect that his purpose was to undermine the received

[50] Pp. 463–4. [51] Ibid.; DF, ch. 15, n. 52. [52] P. 465 n. 57. [53] Ibid.

history of revelation altogether, and that when he agreed that personal immortality could be known only through revelation, he was implying – just as Hume had done – that such a revelation had never been made and that the belief in survival was without foundation. It remains possible to believe this of him; but there remain problems arising from his extreme indirectness of approach, and his apparent unwillingness to confront the problem of revelation as Christians understood it. Warburton had made Christ the revelation of something altogether unknown in previous history, entailing not only the supersession of revelation as made to the Jews, but the extinction of the religions of the city states with their sociable polytheism and pantheistic philosophies. If Gibbon was going round about to intimate his doubts of this narrative, he was missing an opportunity to state the historical fact that it was believed that such a revelation had occurred, from which the revolutionary consequences outlined by Warburton were beginning to follow. The *Divine Legation* narrates a history more complex than can be found in chapter 15 of the *Decline and Fall*, and Gibbon's silence at this point leaves him seeming to make insinuations his critics will not abstain from pursuing.

We return, however, to the trope of enthusiasm.

> When the promise of eternal happiness was proposed to mankind on condition of adopting the faith, and of observing the precepts, of the Gospel, it is no wonder that so advantageous an offer should have been accepted by great numbers of every religion, of every rank, and of every province in the Roman empire.[54]

Gibbon's language is detached; he is speaking of an inducement, not of a conviction; and since he lacks data, he is offering conjectural reasons for the spread of Christianity, and will himself query the 'great numbers' in later passages. But his language changes instantly, as he goes on to speak of a further matter.

> The primitive Christians were animated by a contempt for their present existence, and by a just confidence of immortality, of which the doubtful and imperfect faith of modern ages cannot give us any adequate notion.[55]

Perhaps there is wishful thinking when Gibbon says that contemporary belief is doubtful and uncertain; but as a historian he is saying that the mentality of the primitive Church is hard to recapture, and as a philosopher he is saying that the primitive faith was liberated from all social restraints. There is a further problem. How can he give causes for the spread of belief without indicating his opinion of the foundations on which it rested, and

[54] P. 466. [55] Ibid.

will not the second intention prevail over the first? Without a break, he goes on to tell us about phenomena which are indeed consequent on the belief in immortality, but do not directly tell us how it furthered conversions.

> In the primitive church the influence of truth was very powerfully strengthened by an opinion which, however it may deserve respect for its usefulness and antiquity, has not been found agreeable to experience.[56]

Gibbon launches into Christian eschatology, a theme unknown to the myths of polytheism though not to pagan philosophy. He spends several pages[57] on the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ, which because it remains unfulfilled cannot be abandoned; and then on the associated doctrine of the millennium preceding the general resurrection, widely believed from Justin Martyr[58] to Lactantius, but subsequently abandoned as unorthodox, the book of Revelation having narrowly escaped.[59] But:

> [t]hough it might not be universally received, it appears to have been the reigning sentiment of the orthodox believers; and it seems so well adapted to the desires and apprehensions of mankind, that it must have contributed in a very considerable degree to the progress of the Christian faith. But when the edifice of the Church was almost completed, the temporary support was laid aside.[60]

Here Gibbon is pursuing several strategies at once. The canonicity of Revelation was indeed disputable; but he is reducing it from an authority to an opinion, conducive to the spread of Christianity. In doing so, he comes close to rejecting the fulfilment of prophecy as one of the principal 'evidences' of the truth of that religion: the role it had played for Jortin and for Warburton. Gibbon has nothing to say about Christ as fulfilling the prophecies of the Exile or as himself prophesying the fall of Jerusalem; but Warburton had endowed a lectureship which was to expound the Apocalypse of John as foretelling the rise of the papacy, and Jortin – who delivered this lecture in his turn – had spoken of a chain of prophecies extending to the end of all things, an image which recurs among Gibbon's critics. In linking apocalypse with millennium, furthermore, Gibbon looked beyond the final conflagration[61] to the last judgement, at which the sheep should be separated from the goats to enjoy eternal blessedness or damnation. Gibbon has noticeably little to say about the Christian doctrine of rewards and punishments; the millennium takes the place of the former, and the latter is limited to the eternal damnation of even virtuous pagans, set forth

[56] The three passages quoted occur consecutively at pp. 466–7. [57] Pp. 466–8.
[58] See above, p. 68, for Tillemont on this error of Justin's. [59] P. 468.
[60] Ibid. [61] A, p. 313n.

in a long and gruesome passage from Tertullian.[62] Its function here is merely to explain the spread of conversions.

> Doubtless there were many among the primitive Christians of a temper more suitable to the meekness and charity of their profession. There were many who felt a sincere compassion for the danger of their friends and countrymen, and who exerted the most benevolent zeal to save them from the impending destruction. The careless Polytheist, assailed by new and unexpected terrors, against which neither his priests nor his philosophers could afford him any certain protection, was very frequently terrified and subdued by the menace of eternal tortures. His fears might assist the progress of his faith and reason;[63] and if he could once persuade himself to suspect that the Christian religion might possibly be true, it became an easy task to convince him that it was the safest and most prudent party that he could possibly embrace.[64]

There is no suggestion here that the pagan gods ruled by fear, or that a Lucretian philosophy had been needed to deliver pre-Christians from the fear of them. The polytheist is almost the natural man, living happily in the present and unterrified by eternity; except that his gods are those of civil society as well as of nature. The Christian, denying the gods and uninhibited by society, hurls himself on the polytheist and precipitates him into a world of hopes and fears of which he has no previous idea and with which he does not know how to deal. The rejection of the gods continues its revolutionary progress.

This section of chapter 15 has a coherent sequence, but remains something of a puzzle; the progress from the concept of immortality to its consequences is so rapid as to be superficial, and in dismissing the canonicity of Apocalypse Gibbon has bypassed the evidence of prophecy altogether. The reason may be that he had decided to avoid a full engagement with the thesis of the *Divine Legation of Moses*, which had presented a complex historical narrative of the transition from polytheism and its attendant philosophy to the Christian revelation. Of this he did not wish to speak, but without Warburton his history of the idea of immortality must seem thin. His own thinking on the subject may have been governed by increasing disbelief in personal survival, reaching its climax when Hume died 'the death of a philosopher' six months after the *Decline and Fall* was published. These chapters, we know, were being written in the concluding months of

[62] P. 471.

[63] This is condensed language. Gibbon is converting the Christian belief that faith is above reason into an account of how reason is conquered by faith. See DF, 1, ch. 15, n. 37 (p. 459), and below, p. 266.

[64] P. 471.

1775, and haste and self-imposed pressure may explain the character of this section. In the next, however, the strategy of the two chapters may be seen beginning to take its real shape.

(iv) miracles, evidences and the origins of faith

If Gibbon desires to avoid engagement with Warburton on the history of immortality, the situation is very different in the next section of chapter 15, where he deals with the miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive Church. Conyers Middleton's *Free Enquiry* appears in the text as well as the footnotes,[65] and its presence in Gibbon's argument is so strong that many of his critics took him to be following Middleton's path into deism. As we have seen, however, the case even with Middleton is more complicated than that, and Gibbon's strategy calls for analysis more sophisticated still. Here – we must begin by saying – chapter 15 deals for the first time with 'evidences' of Christianity, as understood by contemporaries and conveniently set out for us by Jortin. He had ranked the 'evidence' of miracles lower than that supplied by the fulfilment of prophecies, but had continued to insist that the truths of revelation were so extraordinary and strange to the human mind that miracles were needed to assure it that the bearers of revelation were divine in their authority. Miracles were signs and even prophecies, designed to convince through the senses where the revealed word must convince through the intellect;[66] it was essential to remember that the truths of revelation were improbable.

Jesus Christ had performed miracles as signs of his mission, but was himself that of which they were signs; his resurrection and ascension were acts of revelation rather than signs of it. However, the more rational Christianity stressed his mission rather than his person, the more were miracles necessary as signs of that mission; to question the miraculous was to touch eighteenth-century theology at a sensitive point. His miracles reported in the Gospels were seldom questioned; neither – with certain modifications – were those which the Apostles were empowered to perform on the day of Pentecost. It was however agreed among Protestants that miraculous powers had at some point ceased; the Catholic Church, claiming to be the continuing body of Christ, insisted on their continuance to and in the present. There was no agreement among Protestants as to the moment of their cessation, and it was not doctrinally necessary that there should

[65] Womersley, i, p. 473; footnotes pp. 472, 473.

[66] 'Miracles cannot directly prove the truth or falsehood, the reasonableness or absurdity, of any doctrine. As they are appeals to our senses, so are doctrines to our reason.' Jortin, 1805, ii, p. 2.

be. It was implied, however, that the Christian intellect no longer needed ocular proof of the miraculous powers of which Scripture was a sufficient assurance. Signs and types were phenomena of a historic past.

Middleton had offered to fix the moment of cessation as early as possible – at the deaths of the last Apostles if not earlier – in order to convict the post-Apostolic Fathers, Justin and Irenaeus, of propagating false miracles and thus beginning the invention of priestcraft. This was too early for many Protestant readers – Jortin was prepared to date priestcraft from the establishment of a state church by Constantine, while conceding that genuine miracles might have persisted past that time[67] – but it was not here that Middleton appeared subversive. He had insisted that one could not accept the authority of post-Apostolic miracles without accepting the papal doctrine of the Church's continuity to the present, but had also insisted that inauthentic miracles had enjoyed the belief and authority of good and holy men long after the moment at which they must have ceased but which could not, for that very reason, be determined. This was to question the Christian intellect's capacity to understand its own history, and implicitly – or so it seemed – to question the grounds on which miracles could be accepted as true, as well as dismissed as false. Middleton was therefore accused – perhaps justly – as casting doubt on the Apostolic and even the Gospel miracles of which he had said nothing, and his denials that this had been his intention were charitably rather than critically accepted.[68] The issue of scepticism was present, though nobody needed to speak of it.

Gibbon's procedure is to follow Middleton in describing a post-apostolic Christianity – 'in the days of Irenaeus, about the end of the second century'[69] – as a culture dominated and almost obsessed by the belief in miracles and even the experience of their occurrences. Demons were exorcised; the dead were raised; all this was confirmed by witnesses; and

> At such a period, when faith could boast of so many wonderful victories over death, it seems difficult to account for the scepticism of those philosophers, who still rejected and derided the doctrine of the resurrection,

language in which Gibbon seems to conflate the general resurrection (and that of Christ?) with the power of raising the dead. Warburton had said that the philosophers were incapacitated from believing in immortality by their own philosophy, but Gibbon is using 'scepticism' in an apparently simpler sense. He goes on to tell the tale of the philosopher Autolycus, who assures the bishop Theophilus that he will accept Christianity if he can

[67] Ibid., II, p. 21. [68] Ibid., II, p. 30. For Mosheim, above, p. 194. [69] P. 472.

meet someone who has been raised from the dead; Theophilus has none to offer.[70]

We realise that Gibbon is making a philosophical as well as a commonsensical point here, if we look from Middleton to Hume and beyond Hume to Jortin. Hume's essay on miracles, which Gibbon certainly knew, lays it down that since a miracle is by definition a defiance of the laws of nature, we prefer any explanation of an event which does not defy them. But such an explanation may be fabulously improbable according to those same laws; and Hume and Gibbon, who were both historians, were well acquainted with the difficulties of verifying ordinary historical narratives. Hume as philosopher, sceptical of the intellect's power to discern the relation of cause to effect by any means other than generalisation from experience, had sent it back to the historical record, the point where the difficulties of explanation became acute. Faced with the claim that a miracle had occurred, the mind must choose between the impossible and the improbable, both in the form of historical narrative, and must rely on its own experience in deciding between them. At this point the Christian intellect, represented by John Jortin, intervened to point out that the function of a miracle was to assist the mind, through the senses, to believe that something had occurred so mysterious and improbable that the mind unaided could never have arrived at it, but might be satisfied by it once it had been revealed. Miracles were instruments of revelation, and it was possible to suppose the intellect accepting at the point where it became most sceptical. The Christian might agree with Hume, and then decide to go beyond him.

Gibbon concurred with Middleton and Hume in remarking that the question of when miraculous powers had ceased in the Church could never be settled once it had been raised.

> Our different sentiments on this subject will be much less influenced by any particular arguments, than by our habits of study and reflection; and above all, by the degree of the evidence which we have accustomed ourselves to require for the proof of a miraculous event. The duty of an historian does not require him to interpose his private judgment in this nice and important controversy; but he ought not to dissemble the difficulty of adopting such a theory as may reconcile the interest of religion with that of reason, of making a proper application of that theory, and of defining with precision the limits of that happy period exempt from error and from deceit, to which we might be disposed to extend the gift of supernatural powers.[71]

[70] P. 473. Cf. p. 226, above. [71] Ibid.

The language is Humean, and the conclusion within limits sceptical. The 'happy period' is not that within which Christ performed his miracles and revealed his person or his mission, but that within which the powers conferred upon the Apostles to continue his activity may be said to have remained effective. If we go so far as to conclude that there was no such period, we are saying only that the Church was never empowered to reinforce revealed doctrine by miraculous signs, and this is not incompatible with belief that there has been revelation. Gibbon, who is careful to confine himself to the period 'from the first of the fathers to the last of the popes',[72] has not shown his hand on what may have happened in that of the Gospels and Acts, and is sceptical only regarding the 'evidences' it transmitted to the age following. But we have reached the point at which his scepticism is converted into history. The passage already quoted on how 'the primitive Christians trod on mystic ground',[73] believing themselves surrounded by demonic and miraculous forces, continues:

> The real or imaginary prodigies, of which they so frequently conceived themselves to be the objects, the instruments, or the spectators, very happily disposed them to adopt with the same ease, but with far greater justice, the authentic wonders of the evangelic history; and thus miracles that exceeded not the measure of their own experience, inspired them with the most lively assurance of mysteries which were acknowledged to surpass the limits of their understanding. It is this deep impression of supernatural truths, which has been so much celebrated under the name of faith; a state of mind described as the surest pledge of the divine favour and of future felicity, and recommended as the first or perhaps the only merit of a Christian.[74]

'The history of the Gospel may be true', Middleton had written, 'though the history of the Church be fabulous'. What he and Gibbon had achieved was to deprive the primary revelation of one of its supernaturally given 'evidences'. This was to leave 'faith' where it had always been, as the mind's leap into believing what it could not substantiate for itself; but faith was not itself under attack, nor were the 'mysteries' it held to have been revealed. These – the Incarnation, the Resurrection, the Redemption – are never defined or re-defined in chapter 15, and what leads the mind to faith in them is not considered. Faith does not depend on miracles or prophecies; but if these are not supernaturally provided, it has no history but its own. Gibbon is depriving the Church of a sacred history, and considering faith as a historical phenomenon; he is not offering to explain faith or revelation as the products of a secular history, but examining the consequences for a

[72] Ibid. [73] Above, p. 227. [74] P. 475.

secular history of the presence in it of those who believe in a revelation and its history.

(v) the rejection of the world and the return to virtue

As Gibbon moves through the sequence of his five causes, the links connecting them become closer, and they have progressively less to do with explaining the spread of Christianity and more with exploring the character of what was spreading. At the end of his third cause, he had arrived at the nature of faith and the Christian doctrine that virtue without faith was insufficient for justification. The fourth cause, originally 'the pure and austere morals of the Christians', must now be restated. Gibbon was committed to presenting the 'morals' of a sect that rejected the pagan gods and with them the practices of civil society; an ethos, therefore, that claimed to rise above civil reason and in many ways despised it. He had therefore encountered a challenge to the primary claim of Enlightenment as these volumes use the term: the claim that civil society was morally sufficient and should not be challenged by values external to it. The question whether the reason engendered by society was capable of criticising its foundations had not yet arisen, or was present only in the Humean account of enthusiasm. Gibbon as historian now encountered the phenomenon of humans who had claimed to refound society on values that transcended it. He had framed his chapter in terms that obliged him to consider this phenomenon as causing its own spread and progress; and he had more to deal with than the 'reformation of manners' he mentions at the outset of this section.[75] The new religion did more than reform manners; it transformed the meaning of the term.

> As it is my intention to remark only such human causes as were permitted to second the influence of revelation, I shall slightly mention two motives which might naturally render the lives of the primitive Christians much purer and more austere than those of their Pagan contemporaries or their degenerate successors – repentance for their past sins, and the laudable desire of supporting the reputation of the society in which they were engaged.[76]

It may be asked how this 'reformation of manners' induced pagans to accept the religion from which it arose, and indeed whether Gibbon in this sentence is really seeking to explain the process of conversion. He is

[75] Ibid.: 'the reformation of manners which was introduced into the world by the teaching of the Gospel'.

[76] Pp. 475–6.

pursuing a deeper and more historical analysis – we begin to re-examine Hugh Blair's judgement – which now leads him to present conversion itself as a phenomenon new in history. 'Repentance for their past sins' has not yet figured in the *Decline and Fall*; the actors in history so far might regret their actions and even regard them as false to their ideal selves, but did not think of them as 'sins' for which they must 'repent', still less face the problem of what 'repentance' was or how it might be effective. Gibbon here articulates a concept he has hardly mentioned so far and will seldom mention again: the Christian doctrine of redemption, of Christ's 'expiatory sacrifice' and his nature as a being capable of redeeming humanity from its burden of sin. Gibbon will remain deeply concerned with the debate over Christ's nature, because he sees it as the foundation of the debate over the Church's authority; but he will not have much to say about the dogma that the Redeemer must be fully consubstantial with the Creator if his redemption is to be effective. It is a consequence that Gibbon as historian does not have much to say about the origins of a culture obsessed with sin, inclined to equate it with the body, and in search of deliverance from it; though one might want to say that this was a central phenomenon of the history he was now studying, and ask where it figured among the five causes.

The ancient critics of Christianity had suggested that it spread by offering ritual cleansing to criminals and others convinced of their own delinquency. This, says Gibbon,

> contributes as much to the honour as it did to the increase of the Church. The friends of Christianity may acknowledge without a blush that many of the most eminent saints had been before their baptism the most hardened sinners. Those persons who in the world had followed, though in an imperfect manner, the dictates of benevolence and propriety, derived such a calm satisfaction from the opinion of their own rectitude as rendered them much less susceptible of the sudden emotions of shame, of grief, and of terror, which have given birth to so many wonderful conversions. After the example of their Divine Master, the missionaries of the Gospel disdained not the society of men, and especially of women, oppressed by the consciousness, and very often by the effects of their vices. As they emerged from sin and superstition to the glorious hope of immortality, they resolved to devote themselves to a life, not only of virtue, but of penitence. The desire of perfection became the ruling passion of their soul; and it is well known that, while reason embraces a cold mediocrity, our passions hurry us with rapid violence over the space which lies between the most opposite extremes.[77]

Here Gibbon recognises the force of the conversion experience, but it is unclear how far he is writing it into civil or philosophical history. He does

[77] P. 476.

not tell us whether he sees himself as sharing either the complacency or the 'cold mediocrity' which he ascribes to those satisfied by the rationality of civil society; nor does he tell us what it was in late antique culture which made so many, and in particular so many women, not so much delinquent as consumed by the sense of their own sinfulness (a phenomenon far from unknown in eighteenth-century culture). Robertson had given an explanation Gibbon could have adopted:[78] with the decay of republican virtue, the peoples of the empire became both more sinful and more aware of it, and the gods of polytheism offered neither morality nor redemption. Gibbon may hint at this when he says they 'emerged from sin and superstition to the glorious hope of immortality'. What he does say quite clearly is that those who had passed through the conversion experience set out in search of supernatural virtue; but of this he proceeds to give a philosophical account. Just how 'penitence' generates 'the desire of perfection' is left unexplained, but once the latter has made its appearance we revert to the language of Hume, and moral philosophy is called in to remind us how rapidly the decay of superstition gives rise to the reign of enthusiasm.

Christian virtue was of course civil as well as spiritual, natural as well as supernatural.

> Their serious and sequestered life, averse to the gay luxury of the age, inured them to chastity, temperance, economy and all the sober and domestic virtues . . . the greater number were of some trade or profession,

and, in a sentence full of meaning for what will follow in this chapter and the next:

> The more they were persecuted, the more closely they adhered to each other.

And there is a transition from the virtuous to the penitential:

> it is a very honourable circumstance for the morals of the primitive Christians, that even their faults, or rather errors, were derived from an excess of virtue.[79]

'The bishops and doctors of the Church', lacking in the *ars critica*, sometimes read the Gospels literally when they should have interpreted them figuratively; a practice Gibbon for once commends. This is a preliminary to Gibbon's main point:

> Ambitious to exalt the perfection of the Gospel above the wisdom of philosophy –

[78] Above, pp. 174–6. [79] P. 477.

we hear the voice of Paul –

the zealous Fathers have carried the duties of self-mortification, of piety, and of patience –

the virtues above nature and sociability –

to a height which is scarcely possible to attain, and much less to preserve, in our present state of weakness and corruption. A doctrine so extraordinary and so sublime must inevitably command the veneration of the people

and so explain the spread of Christianity;

but it was ill calculated to obtain the suffrage of those worldly philosophers who, in the conduct of this transitory life, consult only the feelings of nature and the interest of society.[80]

Gibbon here inserts a footnote[81] which tempts us to identify the 'worldly philosophers' just mentioned. It refers the reader to the *Traité sur la morale des pères*, a work published in 1728 by Jean Barbeyrac. His name calls to mind, first, Gibbon's connection with Lausanne, where Barbeyrac had resigned his chair and moved to Groningen to escape the Calvinist *Formula Consensus*;[82] second, the mental world of Le Clerc and Locke, both of whom Barbeyrac had upheld and promoted in many writings. The work cited by Gibbon, however, was a by-product of his translations of the treatises of Hugo Grotius and Samuel Pufendorf on natural and civil law.[83] Barbeyrac had found occasion to censure the Fathers of the Church, joining Le Clerc in attacking their ornate and uncritical style and their addiction to Platonic and Stoic philosophising. To this he had added a critique of their asceticism and their rejection of civic duties. A Benedictine named Remy Ceillier had published an *apologie* for their *morale*, and to this Barbeyrac replied, for some reason after an interval of ten years.[84] He reviewed the Fathers from Athenagoras to Gregory the Great, singling out for emphasis Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian in the second century, and Augustine in the fifth. With Le Clerc and others in mind, we might expect to find a criticism of the Fathers for failing to inculcate morality and indulging instead in a needless and confusing theology, debating with gnostics and neo-Platonists and preparing the conflict between Arius and Athanasius.[85] We do not find much of this, however; the *Traité* enumerates

[80] Pp. 477–8. [81] Ibid., n. 87. [82] EEG, p. 69.
[83] Goldie and Wokler, 2006, pp. 715, 790–1.
[84] Barbeyrac, 1728, preface, p. iii; Ceillier's *Apologie* dated 1718.
[85] It was this that was developed by Thomas Gordon, in a recension of Barbeyrac so violently anti-patristic as to win a French translation sponsored by d'Holbach (Gordon, 1722; ODNB, xxii, p. 960).

each Father's ascetic rejection of normal social practices, in particular second marriage and the holding of public office whether civil or military (even that of emperor, if *per impossibile* a Christian should have acquired it before Constantine).

The implications of all this become clear when Barbeyrac devotes a chapter to making the case for religious toleration.[86] The Fathers, we are to understand, were trying to erect a social morality on supernatural foundations, withdrawing from marriage and office – the duties of man and citizen according to Pufendorf – in order to live according to a code sacred and spiritual to the exclusion of the social. By failing to develop a code of natural morality, they inhibited the growth of a governing system rooted in natural law and therefore independent of the competing claims of the sacred. Barbeyrac's *Traité* does not supply the history of the growth of theology which relates how the sacred came to be a matter of dispute; nor does he state – what to Gibbon was clear enough – that none of this could happen in a polytheist culture, since no pagan cult challenged natural society in the name of a God both universal and particular.

If we suppose that Gibbon's 'worldly philosophers' might be Grotius, Pufendorf and the other masters of modern natural law, we may link the closing chapters of his first volume with two great debates by which recent scholarship has sought to define Enlightenment: the project of constructing a history of society based on natural law to the exclusion of divine revelation,[87] and the campaign for religious toleration.[88] However, Gibbon owned works on natural law by Grotius, but none by Pufendorf or Barbeyrac;[89] and in the paragraph immediately succeeding that to which the footnote recommending the *Traité* is appended, he embarks on one of his own not too common excursions into moral and social philosophy, in terms perhaps concomitant but certainly not identical with the vocabulary of natural jurisprudence.

> There are two very natural propensities which we may distinguish in the most virtuous and liberal dispositions, the love of pleasure and the love of action. If the former is refined by art and learning, improved by the charms of social intercourse, and corrected by a just regard to economy, to health, and to reputation, it is productive of the greatest part of the happiness of private life.

This would seem Epicurean; it recalls the 'rational voluptuary' met with in an earlier chapter,[90] and reminds us how much of Enlightenment was

[86] Barbeyrac, 1728, ch. XII. [87] Robertson, 2005. [88] Marshall, 2006.

[89] *Library*, pp. 62 (Barbeyrac, the *Traité de la morale* only), 139–40 (Grotius), 231–40 (Pufendorf, works on German law only).

[90] P. 167; FDF, p. 459.

a consumer ideology, in which the capacity for enjoyment was a necessary part of a rational and civilised society.

> The love of action is a principle of a much stronger and more doubtful nature. It often leads to anger, to ambition, and to revenge; but when it is guided by the sense of propriety and benevolence, it becomes the parent of every virtue, and, if these virtues are accompanied with equal abilities, a family, a state, or an empire may be indebted for their safety and prosperity to the undaunted courage of a single man.

This is classical. The virtues presuppose *virtus* and *virtù*, something heroic, pre-civilised and dangerous, but necessary to the civilising process which converts it into the virtues. We are in a Roman world, more that of Cicero than of Grotius and Pufendorf, adopted by Gibbon less out of philosophical preference than because it will serve him in organising the remainder of his chapter. The 'worldly philosophers' become an expanding category, to which any ancient or modern who meets the specification may be admitted, and we are faced with two constituent passions, each necessary to the perfection of human nature.

> The insensible and inactive disposition, which should be supposed alike destitute of both, would be rejected, by the common consent of mankind, as utterly incapable of procuring any happiness to the individual, or any public benefit to the world.

Here any Protestant or Enlightened reader would recognise as implicit the denunciation of monasticism as utterly hostile to social or even religious life, which was almost a knee-jerk reaction in writers of either persuasion. Mosheim had linked it directly to the misguided adoption of philosophy by the Fathers,[91] but Gibbon is attributing it to the presence of the sacred as such. He goes on immediately to the sentence:

> But it was not in *this* world that the primitive Christians were desirous of making themselves either agreeable or useful,[92]

objects or agents in either form of love. This is one of the many witticisms by which Gibbon gave offence, less because he was disrespectful towards the Christians than because his disrespect rested on grounds that had nothing to do with faith; but it was a problem for the historian to explain why they had behaved in ways that made them appear disagreeable and useless. Gibbon, however, does not distinguish between the feelings of third-century Romans and his own towards the Christians. He continues for several pages to review the Christian rejection of pleasure and duty, and

[91] Above, p. 208. [92] P. 478, for all passages just quoted. The emphasis is Gibbon's.

his list of their transgressions is close to Barbeyrac's. We look, however, for his explanation of why the Christians behaved in these ways. So far it is simple; their faith in the mysteries of religion – implicitly in incarnation and redemption – made them aspire to virtues above those of civil society and on occasion in collision with the latter. Gibbon's introduction of pleasure as one of two supreme goods, however, is intended to raise a new question: that of Christian asceticism and insistence that the pleasures of the body – luxury[93] and above all sexuality[94] – were in themselves sinful. He has a great deal to say about the latter, though the joys of sex seem to have been little known to him personally; and here an explanation occurs which he does not follow up.

> In our present state of existence the body is so inseparably connected with the soul, that it seems to be our interest to taste, with innocence and moderation, the enjoyments of which that faithful companion is susceptible. Very different was the reasoning of our devout predecessors; vainly aspiring to imitate the perfection of angels, they disdained, or they affected to disdain, every earthly and corporeal delight.[95]

Gibbon's language is Epicurean, though the reference given in this passage is to the Christian writer Lactantius. Beausobre, whom he had read with attention, had explained at length how difficult it had been even for Christians to escape the massive weight of a philosophical tradition that regarded matter, including the body, as inherently imperfect and the source of evil, so that even the Flesh which the Word had become might be in need of the Word's redemption. 'The perfection of angels' was a challenge to Christian theology, hard to expound without slipping into gnosticism. Here Gibbon had, but ignored, an opportunity to explain the sources of Christian asceticism. Mosheim, who also steered clear of Beausobre, had found those sources in the infection of Scripture by philosophy, encouraging a belief in esoteric meanings to be sought through a Pythagorean bodily discipline. But Gibbon looks no further than a rejection of the social, and therefore the material, in the name of the sacred and the spiritual. 'The loss of sensual pleasure', he observes, 'was supplied and compensated by spiritual pride';[96] the poorer Christians enjoyed condemning the comforts enjoyed by their affluent brethren; and

> Such are the early traces of monastic principles and institutions, which, in a subsequent age, have counterbalanced all the temporal advantages of Christianity;[97]

[93] Pp. 478–9. [94] Pp. 479–81. [95] Pp. 478–9. [96] P. 481. [97] Ibid.

the Enlightened obsession recurs. Enthusiasm has begotten pride; but enthusiasm seems to have no parent other than faith. The mysteries which are the object of faith are nowhere mentioned in the fourth section of chapter 15.

From the rejection of the body we go on to the rejection of the state. The early Christians were pacifists;[98] but Gibbon has earlier given,[99] though he does not here repeat, the reason for their refusal of civil and military office as entailing the worship of the pagan gods. He now says:

> This indolent, or even criminal disregard to the public welfare, exposed them to the contempt and reproaches of the Pagans, who very frequently asked, what must be the fate of the empire, attacked on every side by the barbarians, if all mankind should adopt the pusillanimous sentiments of the new sect? To this insulting question the Christian apologists returned obscure and ambiguous answers, as they were unwilling to reveal the secret cause of their security; the expectation that, before the conversion of mankind was accomplished, war, government, the Roman empire, and the world itself, would be no more.[100]

At this point we encounter the thought, which has persisted among the most recent and distinguished students of Gibbon, that he believed, but never quite declared, that Christian values and practices so far weakened the empire as to be a, even the, cause of its fall.[101] A contrary case may be argued. In the first place, it is hard to find Gibbon arguing, and harder to think he believed, that Christian abstention from military service (above all after Constantine's revolution) significantly weakened Roman capacity to resist the barbarians (who were themselves adopting Christianity). The 'slow decay', which Gibbon mentions apart from the spread of the new religion, had many and complex causes, and he has been unfolding them from the first pages of the *Decline and Fall*; they will be added to in his later volumes. In the second place, we stand in chapter 15 on the brink of a revolution within Christianity itself, which Gibbon is about to introduce. From the pride of rejecting state and society, the new religion is about to transform itself into a society capable of governing in competition with the state. This competition will last a millennium and longer. We look far beyond the mere weakening of the empire, to its transformation and replacement. The underlying theme of chapter 15 is the coming of a new culture, radically unlike that of the pre-Christian empire and requiring a new kind of history.

[98] Ibid. [99] Above, p. 256. [100] P. 482. [101] P. xxxv.

(vi) the rise of episcopacy and the return of *virtù*

This is announced in the opening sentences of the section on the fifth cause of the spread of Christianity.

> But the human character, however it may be exalted or depressed by a temporary enthusiasm, will return by degrees to its proper and natural level, and will resume those passions that seem the most adapted to its present condition. The primitive Christians were dead to the business and pleasures of the world; but their love of action, which could never be entirely extinguished, soon revived, and found a new occupation in the government of the church.

Gibbon has at last used the word which by implication furnishes the key to each section of this chapter. Hume, and with him Voltaire, had imagined enthusiasm, which temporarily suspended the laws of human nature, returning to them and with them re-establishing the disciplines of society; but they had imagined these as the sober practices of craftsmen and tradesmen, so that wild antinomians were reborn as sedate Mennonites and Quakers.[102] Gibbon is about to offer a different narrative, in which enthusiasm will be reborn as *virtù* of a kind both ecclesiastical and Machiavellian.

> A separate society, which attacked the established religion of the empire, was obliged to adopt some form of internal policy, and to appoint a sufficient number of ministers, entrusted not only with the spiritual functions, but even with the temporal direction of the Christian commonwealth. The safety of the society, its honour, its aggrandisement, were productive, even in the most pious minds, of a spirit of patriotism, such as the first of the Romans had felt for the republic, and sometimes of a similar indifference in the use of whatever means might probably conduce to so desirable an end.

A wheel has come full circle, and it may not be too much to say we are in the presence of a Machiavellian moment. The decay of the military republic has led to the decay of civic virtue and its replacement by a culture of civil society, civil manners and civil religion. But with the disintegration of the culture – the result of causes too diverse to be summarised – *virtù*, the love of action which Gibbon, but by no means all the philosophers of civility who were among his friends, had made one of the two ruling passions of the human heart, was about to re-assert itself in the command of an expanding republic based not on reason but on faith. Mosheim had

[102] NCG, pp. 141–4 (Voltaire), 195–6 (Hume).

written of the Church as a *civitas* and a *res publica*; Gibbon was about to show how this republic became Roman again.

> The ecclesiastical governors of the Christians were taught to unite the wisdom of the serpent with the innocence of the dove;

how far from these to the lion and the fox in Machiavelli?

> but as the former was refined, so the latter was insensibly corrupted by the habits of government. In the Church as well as in the world, the persons who were placed in any public station rendered themselves considerable by their eloquence and firmness, by their knowledge of mankind, and by their dexterity in business; and while they concealed from others, and perhaps from themselves, the secret motives of their conduct, they too frequently relapsed into all the turbulent passions of active life, which were tinctured with an additional degree of bitterness and obstinacy from the infusion of spiritual zeal.[103]

The last word repeats and recapitulates many of the themes of Gibbon's chapter, but if theological dispute is, as it very well may be, intended by the use of 'zeal' here, it stands late if not last among the causes of the growth of a power culture. Gibbon now follows, closely and avowedly,[104] Mosheim's account of the development of authority and the progressive separation of clergy from laity, leading from the primitive democracy of the congregations through the distinction between presbyters and bishops, the increasing need of correspondence between the churches, the growth of synods and councils, the subordination of some churches and some bishops to others, until the point is reached where bishops can be said to have usurped authority over their inferiors who were once their colleagues. Like Mosheim,[105] he pauses at this point to remark:

> The progress of the ecclesiastical authority gave birth to the memorable distinction of the laity and the clergy, which had been unknown to the Greeks and Romans. The former of these appellations comprehended the body of the Christian people; the latter, according to the signification of the word, was appropriated to the chosen portion that had been set aside for the service of religion; a celebrated order of men which has furnished the most important, though not always the most edifying, subjects for modern history.[106]

Here is the critical point to which this chapter, and as we shall see the next, are shaped to lead; the point at which the structure of Gibbon's history, and the concept of Decline and Fall, take on new meanings. Gibbon has almost arrived at the moment where a history of *imperium et libertas* gives

[103] For all these passages, see pp. 482–3. [104] DF, ch. 15, n. 105 (p. 483) and pp. 483–90.
[105] Above, pp. 191–2, 210–11. [106] P. 490.

way to one of *imperium et sacerdotium*, but there is a last touch to be given to the concluding term. Mosheim, a German Lutheran able to think of the clergy as one of the two services governing the state, had been able to describe its growth in almost bureaucratic terms: the growth of business and the stratification of office.[107] Gibbon, an Englishman conforming to a church whose bishops were still thought of as exercising a holy office, had a correspondingly greater need to describe a clergy claiming spiritual and apostolic authority. He does so in many pages of this chapter, and has begun the narrative of the clergy's growth before the passage last quoted. Having followed Mosheim to the point where the bishops,

> as soon as they were connected by a sense of their common interest . . . were enabled to attack, with united vigour, the original rights of their clergy and people,

he goes on:

> They exalted the unity and power of the Church, as it was represented in the EPISCOPAL OFFICE, of which every bishop enjoyed an equal and undivided portion. Princes and magistrates, it was often repeated, might boast an earthly claim to a transitory dominion: it was the episcopal authority alone which was derived from the Deity, and extended itself over this and over another world. The bishops were the vicegerents of Christ, the successors of the Apostles, and the mystic substitutes of the high priest of the Mosaic law. Their exclusive privilege of conferring the sacerdotal character invaded the freedom both of clerical and of popular elections.[108]

Gibbon, who is certainly not pleading for any alternative ecclesiology, here confronts a high-churchmanship still vigorous in England, whose adversaries accused it, as they accused papalism, of reducing the entire mission of Christ to the exercise of the *potestas ordinis*. It is that reduction he is describing here, but he has not much to say about its historic origins. None of the components of Christian belief – not even the administration of the sacraments and the absolution from sin, which he has not mentioned at all – whose role in spreading it he has been seeking to describe, has much to do with this exclusive claim to succeed the Apostles in their unique mission. We might at this point revert to the ultimate mysteries of the Christian faith and suppose a superstition that lodged them in a succession of ordinations. If this is the explanation, Gibbon does not quite state it. It is significant, however, that his footnotes[109] have begun to be predominantly concerned with Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, a recognised Father in the Latin succession. Gibbon is cautiously following Mosheim in noting that, as

[107] Above, pp. 210–13. [108] P. 487. Gibbon's capitals. [109] DF, ch. 15, nn. 115–19; pp. 486–8.

the steady growth of correspondence among bishops led to their promotion above presbyters and congregations, so it promoted differentiation within their own ranks and they found themselves subject to metropolitans and patriarchs. To any churchman or historian in Protestant Europe, it was clear that the movement from congregational democracy to episcopal aristocracy had led to the monarchy of the bishop of Rome, who in their own world was claiming to have exercised it from the beginning. Gibbon, who knows that the establishment of a papal supremacy lies centuries ahead of the historical moment he has reached, is able to stress the limits of Roman authority in the late antique church; and there is a famous controversy in which Cyprian of Carthage successfully resisted Victor of Rome.[110] Gibbon knew, though he does not here mention, that Archbishop Laud had been celebrated by his obituarist and historian as *Cyprianus Anglicus*,[111] both on account of his martyrdom at parliamentary hands and because he had exalted the episcopal office, as apostolic, above any Petrine or papal supremacy. Certainly Cyprian appears in these two chapters both as martyr (in chapter 16) and as claiming full apostolic authority for bishops against popes; but, as Laudians and anti-Laudians would have agreed, his role in history is that of an architect of the view that the *potestas ordinis* rendered bishops equivalent with the Church itself. Gibbon explores the growth of episcopal authority under two heads: the one temporal, as bishops became the administrators of increasing wealth through benefactions in money and lands; the other spiritual, as the power of excommunication increased to a point where they seemed possessed of the keys to heaven itself.[112] A single voice dominates the process.

From the imperious declamations of Cyprian we should naturally conclude that the doctrines of excommunication and penance formed the most essential part of religion; and that it was much less dangerous for the disciples of Christ to neglect the observance of the moral duties –

does this evoke the citation of Barbeyrac?

than to despise the censures and authority of their bishops. Sometimes we might imagine that we were listening to the voice of Moses, when he commanded the earth to open, and to swallow up, in consuming flames, the rebellious race which refused obedience to the priesthood of Aaron; and we should sometimes suppose that we heard a Roman consul asserting the majesty of the republic, and declaring his inflexible resolution to enforce the rigour of the laws. 'If such inequalities are

[110] P. 489; Mosheim, 1753, pp. 587–97. [111] Heylyn, 1668. DF, 1, ch. 20, n. 123. [112] Pp. 490–6.

suffered with impunity' (it is thus that the bishop of Carthage chides the lenity of his colleague), 'if such irregularities are suffered, there is an end of EPISCOPAL VIGOUR; an end of the sublime and divine power of governing the Church; an end of Christianity itself'. Cyprian had renounced those temporal honours which it is probable he would never have obtained; but the acquisition of such absolute command over the consciences and understanding of a congregation, however obscure or despised by the world, is more truly grateful to the pride of the human heart than the possession of the most despotic power imposed by arms and conquest on a reluctant people.[113]

The second Israel is becoming a second Rome, and priestcraft ranks either above despotism or below it; but it is not explained just how the congregation has been induced to accept this reduction of their faith in mysteries to an obedience to authority. There is an earlier footnote reading

Nonne et Laici sacerdotes sumus? Tertullian, Exhort. ad Castitat, c. 7. As the human heart is still the same, several of the observations which Mr. Hume has made on Enthusiasm (Essays, vol I. p. 76, quarto edit.) may be applied even to real inspiration.[114]

The enthusiasm of believing in the priesthood of all believers is not dead but sleeping; it is a question whether it has been diverted into belief in the priesthood of bishops. The passage on Cyprian concludes Gibbon's treatment of the fifth and last cause of the spread of Christianity.

(VII) THE COLLAPSE OF POLYTHEISM AND THE PROBLEM OF PHILOSOPHY

Gibbon now reviews and repeats what has been achieved 'in the course of this important, though perhaps tedious, inquiry'.[115] The word 'tedious' may indicate, not only that he has been asking much of his reader, but that he has himself found writing the chapter difficult and exacting, as he tells us elsewhere was indeed the case. It is fair to ask, and to suppose him asking himself, just what has been achieved so far. We have ourselves asked why Gibbon found it necessary to write two chapters on the primitive Church, instead of proceeding direct to its condition at the time of its establishment by Constantine. An answer has appeared; he wished to relate the growth of a system of values and a form of authority – we use the term 'culture' to describe the combination – constituting the end of one history and the beginning of another; and he has done so in rich detail. Blair's complaint that these chapters contain something 'unhistorical' is to

[113] Pp. 496–7. The capitals are Gibbon's. [114] DF, ch. 15, n. 114; p. 486. [115] P. 497.

this extent answered; but not his complaint that Gibbon was 'attacking religion' and that this was irrelevant to his history. The central fact about the emerging culture is that it claimed to originate in a series of actions by God, and Gibbon now repeats that he has 'attempted to display the secondary causes which so efficaciously assisted the truth of the Christian religion'.[116] Each of the five causes he presents, however, gives an account of either the origins or the consequences of the belief in primary causes, that is to say the belief that God was or had been immediately at work. Gibbon's language about this is not unorthodox, but his tone is detached and suggests scepticism.

It is therefore a little too simple, though it is not false, to say that Gibbon was pursuing a 'philosophic' or 'Enlightened' purpose of substituting historical explanation for divine revelation. The five causes in every case trace, but do not explain or directly challenge, the growth of belief in the latter. Gibbon says as much as his review begins.

> It was by the aid of these causes – exclusive zeal, the immediate expectation of another world, the claim of miracles, the practice of rigid virtue, and the constitution of the primitive church – that Christianity spread itself with so much success in the Roman empire.

But of what effects were these the causes, and how did they promote the spread?

> To the first of these the Christians were indebted for their invincible valour, which disdained to capitulate with the enemy whom they were resolved to vanquish. The three succeeding causes supplied their valour with the most formidable arms. The last of these causes united their courage, directed their arms, and gave their efforts that irresistible weight which a small band of well-trained volunteers has so often possessed over an undisciplined multitude, ignorant of the subject and careless of the event of the war.[117]

Gibbon is in some danger of saying that zeal is the cause of further zeal; but we have advanced the hypothesis that he was depicting the condition of enthusiasm, when the intellect breaks free from social conditions and the ordinary laws governing behaviour are suspended. In this condition zeal is its own explanation and does not depend upon any narrative of secular change. The last sentence of the passage quoted presents Gibbon's account of the Christian clergy as a new phenomenon in history: a revolutionary elite, capable of transforming reality and recognising no reality but its own. At the same time, it may be noted, Gibbon is reflecting on his

[116] Ibid. [117] Ibid.

military experience and voicing Adam Smith's forthcoming account of the superiority of the standing army over a militia, the legions over the barbarians of the north or the east.[118]

This is the point from which he develops such explanation as he offers of the failure of the sociable polytheists to resist the enthusiastic Christians. The former were of course confronted, and perhaps paralysed, by the uncomprehended and incomprehensible new; Burke was to fear that European civility would collapse before the Jacobins as the Aztecs had collapsed before the Spaniards.[119] But when faced by the new, it is possible to fall back on the existing, and Gibbon had begun to frame an account of persecution as the response of society to enthusiasm.[120] In chapter 15, he offers an account of the collapse of polytheism in which philosophy begins for the first time to play a part in his historical narrative. He compares the 'well-trained and intrepid' Christians – by implication the ordained priests – with the vagabond holy men of Syria, and then more significantly with the citizen pontiffs of Rome and other cities, magistrates or benefactors charged with civil rituals who 'with cold indifference performed the ancient rites, according to the laws and fashion of their country'.[121] Tolerant of superstitions they despised, they almost certainly present Gibbon's preferred image of a ruling class, but the polytheist universe begins to look fragile once we are told that it was the government of superstition by scepticism. The source of scepticism was philosophy;

> Human reason, which by its unassisted strength is incapable of perceiving the mysteries of faith, had already obtained an easy triumph over the folly of Paganism,[122]

which lacked anything as complex and mysterious as faith (Gibbon is bypassing the problem of the pagan mystery cults); but reason appears in a form Roman rather than Athenian or Alexandrian, Ciceronian rather than Platonic, sceptical rather than metaphysical, Stoic and Epicurean rather than gnostic or hermetic, and seldom if ever Warburtonian. It begets a

> fashion of incredulity . . . communicated from the philosopher to the man of pleasure or business, from the noble to the plebeian, and from the master to the menial slave who waited at his table and who eagerly listened to the freedom of his conversation.[123]

Pas devant les domestiques! We might recall Louis de Beaufort's hint that the republic declined when the vulgar realised that the nobles did not

[118] See *Wealth of Nations*, Book v, ch. 1. [119] Pocock, 1985b, p. 205.
[120] Above, p. 256. [121] Pp. 497–8. [122] P. 498. [123] Ibid.

believe in the gods who legitimised their rule.[124] Here, however, we have a transformation of consciousness. The function of philosophy is prosaic; it transforms poetic myth into propositions that may be true or false, and Gibbon looks ahead in this process when he says that the people

> were filled with doubts and apprehensions concerning the truth of those doctrines to which they had yielded the most explicit belief.

Was it not philosophy which converted myth into doctrine and speculation, and raised problems of belief and truth which had simply not existed before? Gibbon can now go on to say that the multitude are and always will be incurably superstitious, so that

> [s]ome deities of a more recent and fashionable cast might soon have occupied the deserted temples of Jupiter and Apollo, if, in the decisive moment, the wisdom of Providence had not interposed a genuine revelation fitted to inspire the most rational esteem and conviction, whilst, at the same time, it was adorned with all that could attract the curiosity, the wonder and the veneration of the people.[125]

Robertson or Mosheim might have uttered this perfectly orthodox statement, but Gibbon – as so often when he mentions the wisdom of Providence – is less than sincere, and that in a double sense. The last clause contains the process by which Christianity will become again a religion of superstition, while the immediate effect of the collapse of polytheism is its appearance in the form of enthusiasm. It is this which will drive it to fill the vacuum created by the acids of sceptical philosophy.

But philosophy, above all in the ancient world, generates its own enthusiasm. There are two signal absences from this part of Gibbon's chapter. One is Warburton's account of the Epicureanism or proto-Spinozism latent but ineradicable in ancient philosophy. The other is the narrative provided by Beausobre and Mosheim, confronting the Gospels with Hellenic and Hellenised philosophy from the time of Paul's epistles and Philo the contemporary of Jesus Christ. In Mosheim's hands particularly, there was the part played by Alexandrian neo-Platonism, a formidable opponent which had offered to incorporate both polytheism and Christianity in a synthesis of metaphysics, and had changed the latter profoundly – Mosheim thought harmfully – in the course of the encounter. Here was a narrative that showed ancient culture alive and responding to challenge and could be used to explain much in the subsequent history of religion, philosophy and ecclesiastical authority, including the rise of disputatious theology

[124] FDF, pp. 364–5. [125] Pp. 498–9.

in conjunction with the emerging distinction between clergy and laity. Gibbon had studied Beausobre and Mosheim attentively; he makes use of both in the footnotes and of Mosheim in the text of chapter 15; there is evidence that he knew and understood their narrative. He even remarks, later and in passing, that 'it was in the school of Alexandria that the Christian theology appears to have assumed a regular and scientifical form'.[126] Yet chapter 15 contains nothing about the interactions between Christian teachings and late antique philosophy, in which it is possible to see the latter as conquering or converting the former. We are left with the single and isolated paragraph which introduces the neo-Platonists at the end of chapter 13,[127] and promises to study their role in the history of the church.

He is neglecting the opportunity to present a radical criticism of Christian belief as founded from its beginnings in an antiquated philosophy, a criticism at least as old as Hobbes,[128] whom he never cites;[129] and at the same time failing to narrate the triumph of Christianity over its philosophic enemy. From the last quoted passage, he turns from the decay of polytheism to a lengthy attempt to measure and free from exaggeration the actual spread of Christianity before the time of Constantine, and emphasises the extent to which it was a Hellenist phenomenon.

> The rich provinces that extend from the Euphrates to the Ionian Sea were the principal theatre on which the apostle of the Gentiles displayed his zeal and piety.[130]

It was a slow process by which the gospel had moved west, and even in Constantine's time Christianity was thin on the ground of Gaul and Britain where it was later to be dominant. Nevertheless:

> It has been observed, with truth as well as propriety, that the conquests of Rome prepared and facilitated those of Christianity. In the second chapter of this work we have attempted to explain in what manner the most civilized provinces of Europe, Asia and Africa were united under the dominion of one sovereign, and gradually connected by the most intimate ties of laws, of manners, and of language . . . The authentic histories of the actions of Christ were composed in the Greek language, at a considerable distance from Jerusalem, and after the Gentile converts were grown extremely numerous.[131] As soon as those histories were translated into the

[126] Pp. 502–3. [127] Pp. 398–9. [128] Mastnak, 2004; Hobbes, 2008.

[129] He possessed a first edition of *Leviathan* and a 1750 edition of Hobbes's moral and political works (*Library*, p. 151).

[130] P. 500.

[131] It had always been recognised that the Gospels were written at different times and in different circumstances. See above, pp. 30, 54–5, 58–9, 128, 187. Gibbon here cites (n. 153) the orthodox writings of Mill and Lardner.

Latin tongue, they were perfectly intelligible to all the subjects of Rome, excepting only to the peasants of Syria and Egypt,[132] for whose benefit particular versions were afterwards made.[133]

The history of manners and empire is a history increasingly Latinised, whatever the Greek and eastern role in it; Decline and Fall itself is a Latin and western concept. Gibbon's enquiry into the spread of Christianity moves from Antioch and Alexandria to Rome and Mediterranean Africa, where a warm climate encourages an enthusiasm notably lacking in Gaul.[134] But as his focus moves from Greek to Latin, the encounters between Christianity and high culture grow less, and we find him telling us how uninformed and indifferent the great minds of antiquity were regarding the marvels of the new religion. The context is a vigorous defence of Christianity as a religion of the uneducated, and Gibbon goes so far as to declare

> that the Apostles themselves were chosen by Providence among the fishermen of Galilee,

though they were not of course chosen by Providence, but by Jesus of Nazareth walking along the beach. 'Providence', if it means anything, must denote his divine wisdom and prudence in beginning his mission among the unlearned; Mosheim had praised this, but had also noted the need for a learned Apostle, which had led to the conversion of St Paul.[135] Gibbon does not proceed to the birth of the Christian intellect in the writings of Paul and John, but blandly advises

> us diligently to remember that the kingdom of heaven was promised to the poor in spirit . . . while, on the contrary, the fortunate are satisfied with the possession of this world; and the wise abuse in doubt and dispute their vain superiority of reason and knowledge.

There seems little beyond the evident insincerity of this passage to freight it with subversive meaning. Gibbon goes on, however:

> We stand in need of such reflections to comfort us for the loss of some illustrious characters, which in our eyes might have seemed the most worthy of the heavenly present. The names of Seneca, of the elder and younger Pliny, of Tacitus, of Plutarch, of Galen, of the slave Epictetus, and of the emperor Marcus Antonius, adorn the age in which they flourished, and exalt the dignity of human nature . . . Yet all these sages (it is no less an object of surprise than of concern) overlooked or rejected the perfection of the Christian system. Their language or

[132] Cf. ch. 2, p. 66. [133] Pp. 499–500. [134] Pp. 504–5. [135] Above, p. 187.

their silence equally discover their contempt for the growing sect which in their time had diffused itself over the Roman empire.[136]

Philosophers themselves, they thought of the Christians (if they thought of them at all) as 'obstinate and perverse enthusiasts'.[137] It is the problem of the virtuous pagans; but if Gibbon enjoys suggesting that men deeply admired in his own age found Christianity intellectually contemptible, he leaves unstated in this passage the secret of its victory over them. We do not learn where the Roman sages encountered the five causes. And the sages are predominantly Latins; once again we encounter Gibbon's tendency to confine 'philosophy' to the Ciceronian and the sceptical. This passage does not look as far as Athens or Alexandria; it does not cover Mosheim's great portrait of neo-Platonism as a strategy of defeating Christianity by offering to include it in a philosophy Greek and Egyptian in its foundations. Gibbon knows about this – he could not have avoided it – and will make use of it in later chapters; but here it has been mentioned, reductively and in a context designed to diminish it, in a somewhat earlier passage beginning with the quoted reproach, probably Julian's, that the Christians 'cautiously avoid the dangerous encounter of philosophers'. Gibbon, who knows that this cannot hold water, says:

> As the humble faith of Christ diffused itself through the world, it was embraced by several persons who derived some consequence from the advantages of nature or fortune. Aristides, who presented an eloquent apology to the emperor Hadrian, was an Athenian philosopher. Justin Martyr had sought divine knowledge in the schools of Zeno, of Aristotle, of Pythagoras, and of Plato, before he fortunately was accosted by the old man, or rather the angel, who turned his attention to the study of the Jewish prophets. Clemens of Alexandria had acquired much various reading in the Greek, and Tertullian in the Latin, language. Julius Africanus and Origen possessed a very considerable share of the learning of their times; and although the style of Cyprian is very different from that of Lactantius, we might almost discover that both those writers had been public teachers of rhetoric.[138]

Gibbon is merely ticking these worthies off on a list of concessions to be made and forgotten; that there was a great and complex history to be written around them is something he must have known from his authors but is for some reason choosing to ignore. It is with astonishment that we turn from the ecclesiastical historians he studied to find him concluding:

> Even the study of philosophy was at length introduced among the Christians, but it was not always productive of the most salutary effects,

[136] P. 510. [137] Ibid. [138] Pp. 508–9.

and inserting a conventional passage from Eusebius as a sufficient illustration.[139] Why he chooses to ignore – there is no reason given for disbelieving – the history he had read is among the unsolved problems of chapter 15. Is it a strategic choice on Gibbon's part, or is the chapter assembling itself as he writes, in ways he does not perfectly control?

(viii) the miraculous darkness

Has there been an 'attack on religion'? Here we encounter the gap between what Gibbon says and the tone in which he says it; on the latter his critics and admirers were to base some far-reaching interpretations of his intentions. We need to remember, however, that he wrote in the technical language of ecclesiastical history, and was read by clerics well acquainted with its critical possibilities. At the outset of chapter 15 he gave as the primary cause of Christianity's spread 'the convincing evidence of the doctrine', and a study of Jortin on this matter informed us that this phrase was less than precise. The 'evidences' were prophecy (neglected by Gibbon) and miracles; the latter were appeals to the senses and could never convey proofs of the doctrine. They were evidences of the divine power of the agent – above all Christ – bearing a divine message; who the agent was, and what was his message, were further questions. The Christian revelation, Jortin and others made clear, was astonishing, above and beyond probability, and miracles aided the mind by astonishing it, and making the leap into what could be understood only when it had been accepted. Gibbon's account of 'faith' shows that he understood this.

If miracles were only partial evidence for revelation, to reject them was only a partial rejection of revelation; the history of the Gospel might be true though the history of the Church was fabulous. Jortin found much in the latter which was hard to justify, though equally hard to criticise; he thought as a historian, while remaining a believer. Gibbon went a step further, accepting faith in the 'mysteries' of revelation as a historical force, while situating it in a philosophical history that owed much to Hume, and narrated Christian enthusiasm and the rise of the clergy. To the extent to which he offered to explain faith, he was offering historical understanding as an alternative to it, but it does not follow that he was attacking faith or even dissolving it into a narrative of secular causation. The mysteries were there even if he did not believe in them; to demolish them he must demolish the Christ of the Gospels, and this he never offered to do.

[139] P. 509.

To those whose faith was in Christ methodological detachment was the same as active disbelief. The critics to be studied in a later chapter join in demanding a history based in revelation itself. Jortin conducted us, however, to a point of ambiguity, where a revelation beyond reason, claiming in a phrase much used by Gibbon to 'satisfy and subdue' it, gives way to a Christ who does no more than 'improve' the 'religion of nature'. His need of miracles to establish his divine mission is the greater because his message does less to leap beyond reason, and Gibbon's critics were open to this ambivalence to a point where the issue of miracles and Gibbon's connection with Middleton remained the centre of their case against him. So long as the case against miracles was directed only against those alleged by the post-Apostolic Fathers, the Middletonian criticism remained compatible with Protestant ecclesiology; it could merge with a narrative of the rise of priestcraft, linking an account of the corruption of the Church under Constantine with the papal usurpation centuries later. Even Tillemont, who accepted the continuity of miracles, feared the corruption of the Church when persecution ceased. At the end of chapter 15, however, as a conclusion to the whole chapter, Gibbon suddenly develops a rhetoric going farther than any so far seen. His account of Roman and Greco-Roman literate culture, moving west from the schools of Hellenist philosophy, has been emphasising that its leaders knew very little about Christianity and despised what they knew. In these concluding paragraphs, this suddenly becomes an ironic account of their ignorance – oblivion rather – of the evidences of Christianity, as described by Jortin and as mentioned by Gibbon as the primary cause of its spread. The primitive Christians relied more on the prophecies than on the miracles, and employed allegory and typology to reconcile the Old Testament with the New. Gibbon is scornful of these devices, which would in any case have meant nothing to the Romans unacquainted with the Hebrew writings.

> But how shall we excuse the supine inattention of the Pagan and philosophic world, to those evidences which were presented by the hand of Omnipotence, not to their reason, but to their senses? During the age of Christ, of his Apostles, and of their first disciples, the doctrine which they preached was confirmed by innumerable prodigies. The lame walked, the blind saw, the sick were healed, the dead were raised, demons were expelled, and the laws of Nature were frequently suspended for the benefit of the Church. But the sages of Greece and Rome turned aside from the awful spectacle, and pursuing the ordinary occupations of life and study, appeared unconscious of any alterations in the moral or physical government of the world.[140]

[140] P. 512.

Here Gibbon has broken the taboo respected by Middleton. He is speaking openly of the Gospel miracles, including those performed by Christ, as evidence, presented to the senses, of his divine mission. He goes on to select the miraculous darkness that covered 'the whole earth, or at least . . . the land of Judea'[141] at the moment of Christ's death, and went unnoticed by historians accustomed to record prodigies. Certainly, this was rather a portent than a miracle; it was not performed as a sign by any actor among men; but given the evident use of irony in these passages, it is hard to see how Gibbon could have gone further[142] – short of denying the whole Gospel narrative – in rejecting 'the evidences of the doctrine itself', the primary cause as he had stated of the spread of Christianity. But evidences were one thing and doctrine was another; Gibbon is not telling us what doctrine Christ preached, or what the Apostles preached concerning him. Every historian from Fleury to Jortin had said that these doctrines were amazing to the human mind, which could never have arrived at them on its own, and Gibbon had repeatedly used the same language, describing 'the mysteries of faith'[143] without developing his scepticism concerning them. Since Christians thought the support of miracles secondary but necessary, he was on solid ground when attacking this aspect of religion; but faith, which he had recognised even when treating it as enthusiasm, had played a part in the spread of Christianity which the belief in miracles helped but was not enough to sustain. As a historian, then, Gibbon had questions to answer which he could not dismiss by attacking even the miracles of Christ. Had the selection of 'evidences' as a primary cause of the spread been a tactical error? We are left uncertain how far he had developed an attack on faith; even whether he had decided how far to develop one. But if 'evidences' were a secondary issue, Jortin before and his critics after him were agreed in giving them a primary place.

[141] P. 512 and n. 195.

[142] See Gibbon's autobiographies (A, p. 285) for the importance he ascribed to his studies of the miraculous darkness. 'I privately drew my conclusions from the silence of an unbelieving age.' He mentions an 'ample dissertation' on the subject, written between 1771 and 1772.

[143] Above, pp. 266, 281.

CHAPTER 9

The sixteenth chapter: intolerance, persecution and philosophy

(1) THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF TOLERATION AND INTOLERANCE

Gibbon opens his sixteenth chapter – on 'the conduct of the Roman government towards the Christians, from the reign of Nero to that of Constantine' – with language that recalls the problems posed by both ancient history and Hanoverian politics. 'If we seriously consider', he says

> the purity of the Christian religion, the sanctity of its moral precepts, and the innocent as well as austere lives of the greater number of those who during the first ages embraced the faith of the Gospel –

language antiseptically emphasised in the previous chapter, as in most contemporary sermons and homilies –

> we should naturally suppose that so benevolent a doctrine would have been received with due reverence even by the unbelieving world; that the learned and the polite, however they might deride the miracles, would have esteemed the virtues of the new sect;

miracles and their scoffing rejection defining Christian claims and ancient philosophy as each appeared to Gibbon, as well as a set of attitudes open to an eighteenth-century unbeliever;

> and that the magistrates, instead of persecuting, would have protected an order of men who yielded the most passive obedience to the laws, though they declined the active cares of war and government.[1]

The matter of the last clause has been discussed in chapter 15, and its statement here clearly sets limits to the extent to which Christian pacifism is to be seen as contributing to the decline and fall of the empire. Christians may have been at fault in rejecting the active duties and virtues of the citizen; they are not at fault in yielding passive obedience to the laws of

[1] Womersley, 1994, I, p. 514 (hereafter cited in this chapter by page only).

civil society. Gibbon is employing the highest of Tory statements of the civic duty of the Christian, and at the same time implicitly reopening the question underlying his opening chapters. The new religion renewed and in some ways strengthened the manners of Roman society, though at a level of civic participation even lower than that established under Augustan monarchy. If Antonine politeness had not compensated for the lessening of civic virtue, would the piety of Christian culture be any better or worse? And when the Christians were not innocent moralists, they were turbulent enthusiasts obeying laws of their own.

The term 'passive obedience' was resonant in English political discourse, and Gibbon's use of it here cannot have been without implications, though these were not immediate. Chapter 16, as his next sentence shows, is devoted to the question of toleration, and since the Feathers Tavern Petition of 1772 English politics had been concerned with demands for increased toleration that might look beyond that concept itself. Within the established Church as well as marginal to it, there were requests for relief from subscription to the most uncompromisingly Trinitarian of the Thirty-Nine Articles; and for more than a century, the issue of the Trinity had been recognised as fundamental to the definition of the Church's authority and had given rise to debates in both politics and theology. Not without support from the less Trinitarian within the Church of England, some of those in Dissent from it had agitated not for relief but for actual repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts that excluded them from public office.[2] This was more than a demand for toleration of worship, confession and congregation; there were beginning to be those who affirmed that the state had no right to give or withhold toleration, since the definition of God was outside its concerns. But if the state might not define God, it could follow that God did not define the state, and this inexorably entailed further definitions, whether public or private, of his nature. The United States of America is a republic to which this paradox remains relevant, as does the polarisation of Enlightened Christianity between unitarian and evangelical extremes.

Gibbon in 1776 was probably not concerned with the problems raised by these demands, though they were to concern him as both member of parliament and historian. By 1782 at latest, he was to engage in an increasingly bitter altercation with Joseph Priestley, who carried a history of Christian belief not unlike Gibbon's on to a demand for the end of all established churches, which he knew to be politically as well as theologically

[2] For a useful introduction, see Haakonssen, 1996. Starkie, 2007, reminds us that actual repeal of these acts had been a political possibility at the time of the Bangorian controversy.

revolutionary. At the time of composing chapter 16, however, Gibbon need not have had Rational Dissent before him and had not yet embarked on his history of Christian theology. His use of the term 'passive obedience' may signal no more than a whiggish conviction that when the churchmen were not challenging public authority, they were unduly exalting it in a Christianised form. None the less, he was embarking on the problem of toleration, and in his next sentence stated it as the problem it was to all historians of Christianity and the late antique world. 'If', he continues,

> we recollect the universal toleration of Polytheism, as it was invariably maintained by the faith of the people, the incredulity of philosophers, and the policy of the Roman senate and emperors, we are at a loss to discover what new offence the Christians had committed . . . and what new motives could urge the Roman princes,

who ruled with indifference over innumerable cults, to single out one religion for punishment.[3] The terminology of this sentence rewards analysis. By 'faith' Gibbon cannot mean the 'faith' of the Christians studied in the preceding chapter: the mind's deliberate leap beyond what reason can support; for out of this intolerance and persecution can grow. The polytheist world is one of myths and images, and 'faith', if anything more than the dutiful observance of ceremony, can only mean the conviction that the gods are part of reality. This is superstition to the incredulous philosopher, but it is not doctrine or opinion until his criticism defines it as such, nor does he attempt to subvert or eradicate it by so defining it. One myth cannot falsify another, since a myth is not a proposition; mythopoeia maintains all myths alike and there is no contradiction between them. Gibbon calls this 'universal toleration', but this is surely a misnomer and an anachronism. Toleration and intolerance exist only where there are doctrines and opinions incompatible with one another, and we are in a world where that has yet to happen. The 'incredulity of philosophers' may redefine myths as opinions, but cannot persuade the worshipper of one god to think his worship a belief incompatible with the worship of another. The incredulity of the philosopher alienates him from the world of myth, but serves to maintain the 'toleration' – in fact the state of pre-philosophic innocence in which he is incredulous.

It is a different matter when the ancient Christians appear, since for them the pagan gods are not myths, and are not dismissed by philosophy as false opinions; they are real and malignant demons, and the cultic religions are not so much superstition as demonolatry and sorcery. There

[3] P. 514.

is a history of how this demonology (and angelology) arose, but Gibbon does not seem to tell it; philosophies in which matter and energy were one, and energy could be personalised as a diversity of actors, may have had something to do with it. At all events, the Christians are intolerant, denouncing all gods but their own not as false and fictitious but as real and evil, and much of chapter 15 has been spent in pursuing the consequences of this. Toleration, however, has yet to be made possible, if by that term we mean not so much the toleration of one god by the worshippers of another as the toleration of one doctrine about the only possible God by those who hold another opinion about him. To understand why this was almost insuperably difficult we must think our way into a world of monotheism, where the one God had revealed himself in history but his revelation was to be defined by philosophy. From Justin Martyr to Johann Lorenz von Mosheim it had been clear that, independently of the Old and New Dispensations, the ancient Gentiles had developed ways of thinking philosophically about an unrevealed God who was not many but one; this, however, is a history that Gibbon had so far chosen not to tell.

He had, however, made it clear that the early Christians were 'enthusiasts' – a term used only twice in chapter 15, but repeatedly in its successor[4] – in the Humean sense that their rejection of the pagan gods entailed refusal of the rites and practices of civil society over which the gods presided, leaving the mind free to be guided exclusively by its beliefs and convictions. Burke was to describe revolution as what happened when the intellect was freed from the restraints of property; Gibbon, two decades earlier, was thinking more of manners than of property, but was to recognise the affinity between his thought and Burke's when it came to his attention. The theme of chapter 16 is that the Christian rejection of the gods seemed to entail a rejection, first, of all fellowship with the other members of society, and second, of any divine support of civility except their own, thus moving a more than tolerant regime to persecute them for their intolerance. The manners and morals of the Christians might be civil and peaceable to the highest degree, but this did not mitigate their offence in pursuing this morality for reasons exclusively their own, denying the morality of others.

Gibbon reiterates the analysis given in chapter 15 of Christian monotheism and intolerance as enlarging its inheritance from the Jews. The latter's belief that the Lord of all the earth was theirs alone made them – he says

[4] Chapter 15: pp. 482 (line 24), 510 (last line); chapter 16, pp. 515 (line 12), 516 (line 9, 'of the Jews'), 519 (line 24), 537 (line 27 and n. 11), 538 (line 2), 547 (line 26), 558 (line 27), 562 (line 20). This term is usually employed in presenting Roman opinions of the Christians.

with most other leaders of European Enlightenment – hate and be hated by all other peoples. This state of war – one is tempted to call it jihad – persisted even after the destruction of the Temple: in Bar Kochba's claim to be the warrior messiah and conqueror still expected by the people, and in the aggressor role Gibbon ascribes to the Jews in the conflicts and ethnic cleansings said to happen in mixed-race cities of the empire after the fall of Jerusalem. Modern history has compelled us to assume that Jews were always the victims; but Gibbon's footnotes confront exaggerated figures of the massacres carried out by Jews in these conflicts with equally exaggerated figures of the massacres of Jews by the Roman army.[5] Even the destruction of the Temple, however, and the subsequent exile of the Jews from the site of Jerusalem, did not amount to a persecution of their religion. Like any other people, they were permitted and even expected to practise the religion of their ancestors, and Roman rule respected and encouraged the authority-structures formed in the Diaspora. This toleration fostered commerce, if not conversion, and the free market performed one of the miracles we still expect of it.

> Awakened from their dream of prophecy and conquest, they assumed the behaviour of peaceable and industrious subjects. Their irreconcilable hatred of mankind, instead of flaming out in acts of blood and violence, evaporated in less dangerous gratifications. They embraced every opportunity of over-reaching the idolaters in trade, and they pronounced secret and ambiguous imprecations against the haughty kingdom of Edom.[6]

It cannot be said that the preconditions of ethnic cleansing have disappeared from Gibbon's mind; but it is clear once again that the function of toleration is to diminish the beliefs it protects. But:

> The Jews were a *nation*, the Christians were a *sect*; and if it was natural for every community to respect the sacred institutions of their neighbours, it was incumbent on them to persevere in those of their ancestors . . . Every Christian rejected with contempt the superstitions of his family, his city, and his province. The whole body of Christians unanimously refused to hold any communion with the gods of Rome, of the empire, and of mankind. It was in vain that the oppressed believer asserted the inalienable rights of conscience and private judgement –

if he ever did; these are modern, not ancient values.

> Though his situation might excite the pity, his arguments could never reach the understanding, either of the philosophic or of the believing part of the Pagan world.[7]

[5] P. 516, nn. 1 and 2. [6] P. 517. [7] Pp. 517–18.

To reject the gods of one's fathers was more than impiety; it was a threat to empire. Caesar reigned by protecting all the gods, and thereby shared in their godhead. It was dangerous, but might be overlooked, when Jews refused to pay him tribute;[8] Gibbon does not mention the famous episode when Jesus distinguished between the *solidus*, used to pay tribute to Caesar, and the *shekel*, devoted to the costs of the Temple,[9] but he knew that what Caesar wanted from tribute was less income than acknowledgement of his majesty. In denying all the gods at once, Christians, who might spring up anywhere, negated the entire universe in which that majesty could have meaning.[10] It could avail them nothing that they upheld passive obedience to Caesar's laws, if they passively disobeyed the recognition of his sacredness. In the end they must claim that he could be sacred only as they defined what that meant.

(ii) persecution as a police problem

The magistrates of empire therefore persecuted Christianity in the name of civil society, acting against a set of values independent of it, in no way hostile to it but calling for its total re-evaluation. It was not a question of one doctrine learning to tolerate another, since the religions of the empire were based on no philosophy, but were a set of practices challenged by something outside practice. Gibbon could therefore go beyond Robertson or any other enlightened churchman presenting Christianity as a reformation of morality; he could explain persecution as the work of magistrates informed by all the values of civil society, and seeing them as under attack. We know from Tillemont, Mosheim and Warburton that this was a view shared by Christian historians;[11] it was the first of these who had gone farthest in asserting that persecution had been conducted by good men afflicted by the pride of believing that the good could be achieved without God. Such was the consequence of the claim that grace exceeded, though it did not replace, the moral law.

In this way it had happened that Marcus Aurelius became a crucial figure in the historiography of persecution.[12] He found predecessors in the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan,[13] and it was a necessity rather than a coincidence that the first period in which persecution could be documented as a deliberate act of state was that of the 'five good

[8] P. 515. [9] Mark xii, 15–17.
[10] P. 518. In writing this section I have been aided by Ando, 2008.
[11] Above, pp. 62–3, 70–2, 83, 175, 190, 233. [12] Pp. 550–1. Above, pp. 63, 66–7, 194–7, 233.
[13] Pp. 534–6.

emperors' which Gibbon thought the happiest in the history of western mankind. The peace of society had not yet disintegrated to the point where supernatural virtues must come in to replace it, and its officers must see them as threatening it. Modern Enlightenment was looking at its ancient moment. Persecution, however, was no more than a necessary and incidental police action. There had been a period when it was urged, by angry Jews resisting a false messiah, on tolerant and contemptuous Roman magistrates who had usually resisted them[14] – what would have happened, Enlightenment must have asked itself, if Pilate had dismissed the case against Jesus? There had followed another, when the same magistrates underwent the same pressures from angry crowds of pagans. Mosheim had seen such incidents as the work of interested priests, stirring up the superstitions of urban mobs, but Gibbon leaves no doubt that it was otherwise.

> Whilst the numerous spectators, crowned with garlands, perfumed with incense, purified with the blood of victims, and surrounded with the altars and statues of their tutelary deities, resigned themselves to the enjoyment of pleasures which they considered as an essential part of their religious worship, they recollected that the Christians alone abhorred the gods of mankind, and, by their absence and melancholy on these solemn festivals, seemed to insult or to lament the public felicity.[15]

This of course is superstition; neglect of the gods brings public misfortune;[16] but the public felicity is sociable before it is sacred. Superstition is the religion of society; it sees the divine in material objects shared by humans in communities; and the philosophy which supports polytheism, while deriding superstition, is more Roman than Greek, but perhaps more Humean than Stoic.

> The sages of Greece and Rome, who had elevated their minds to the contemplation of the existence and attributes of the First Cause, were induced by reason or by vanity to reserve for themselves and their chosen disciples the privilege of this philosophical devotion. They were far from admitting the prejudices of mankind as the standard of truth; but they considered them as flowing from the original disposition of human nature; and they supposed that any popular mode of faith and worship which presumed to disclaim the assistance of the senses would, in proportion as it receded from superstition, find itself incapable of restraining the wanderings of the fancy and the visions of fanaticism.[17]

The word 'enthusiasm' punctually recurs in the next sentence, denoting what philosophers of this kind thought of the theology of the Christians.

[14] Pp. 525–6. [15] Pp. 536–7. [16] P. 537, lines 3–9. [17] P. 519.

The philosophy of society entails the culture of Augustan Rome; the polite could understand the deification of a man, but could not endure the fact that the life and death of Jesus Christ were profoundly anti-heroic;[18] and Gibbon begins to see the high civilisation of the empire as bound up with the act of persecution. When he records the torture of Christians by Nero – not strictly a persecution because a killing by a tyrant – it is less because the Christians suffered than because Tacitus, the greatest of historians, narrated it,[19] and he says nothing about the supposed deaths of Peter and Paul (the basilica erected to the former is mentioned).[20] Ancient culture persecuted because civil society knew no alternative. Christian persecutors know, or have no excuse for not knowing, what faith and conscience are, but in the Roman world these concepts existed only for readers of Plato's *Apology*. But if persecution was paradoxically the response of a tolerant culture to intolerance, toleration must have set limits to persecution; and, not unlike Tillemont and Mosheim,[21] Gibbon dismisses the atrocity stories of martyrology in order to argue that the magistrates 'were actuated, not by the furious zeal of bigots, but by the temperate policy of legislators',[22] and 'that the greatest part . . . behaved like men of polished manners and liberal education, who respected the rules of justice, and who were conversant with the precepts of philosophy'.[23] That indeed – it is both the irony and the tragedy of the period – is why there were persecutors; but though Gibbon has not much sympathy for those they condemned, he does not condemn or blame the latter. It was a collision of incompatibilities; but civil society must persecute civilly, and moderation moderately. Gibbon advances a set of hypotheses to this effect,[24] which he thinks the evidence will verify and convert from conjecture to history. Tacitus, Pliny and other historians are called as witnesses, as these theses are successively developed.

There is the central contradiction, justly exposed by Tertullian,[25] that the magistrates aimed to achieve submission rather than punishment, and therefore went as far as torture to induce the accused to say and do things by which they might escape sentence and execution. It was moderation that confronted martyrdom and even provoked it, as Tillemont seems to have realised;[26] and a climax of incompatibilities is reached when Gibbon recounts the generosity, hospitality and honour with which Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, is treated down to the moment of his decapitation, and even after it.[27] By then a great deal has happened. The Church has appeared and

[18] P. 520. [19] Pp. 529–31. [20] P. 528. [21] Above, pp. 85–6, 190. [22] P. 524. [23] P. 539. [24] Pp. 524–5. [25] P. 538 n. 64. [26] Above, pp. 85–6. [27] Pp. 541–5.

grown beyond its primitive simplicity; Cyprian's constancy and courage as a martyr cannot be separated from his ambition as a bishop, the office for which he claims apostolic authority; and the emperors under whom he suffers are Valerian and Gallienus.[28] We have come a long way from Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, and the regime may no longer be capable of the contemptuous tolerance of the high imperial period. The 'five good emperors' regarded persecution as a necessary police action, which they endorsed when it was necessary and restrained when it was not. From Decius to Galerius, it was a policy of state, revealing that the state had a rival. There is a turning point, close to one of those chosen for emphasis in the existing narrative of Decline and Fall.[29] Persecution is an index of weakness.

(iii) persecution as reason of state; philosophers as persecutors

The fall of Philip introduced, with the change of masters, a new system of government, so oppressive to the Christians, that their former condition, ever since the time of Domitian,[30] was represented as the state of perfect freedom and security, if compared with the rigorous treatment which they experienced under the short reign of Decius. The virtues of that prince will scarcely allow us to suspect that he was actuated by a mean resentment against the favourites of his predecessor;[31] and it is more reasonable to believe that, in the prosecution of his general design to restore the purity of Roman manners,[32] he was desirous of delivering the empire from what he considered as a recent and criminal superstition.[33] The bishops of the most considerable cities were removed by exile or death; the vigilance of the magistrates prevented the clergy of Rome during sixteen months from proceeding to a new election; and it was the opinion of the Christians that the emperor would more patiently endure a competitor for the purple than a bishop in the capital. Were it possible to suppose that the penetration of Decius had discovered pride under the disguise of humility, or that he could foresee the temporal dominion which might insensibly arise from the claims of spiritual authority, we might be less surprised that he should consider the successors of St Peter as the most formidable rivals to those of Augustus.[34]

The well-intentioned Decius is involved in a clash of both cultures and authorities. The virtues of Rome are in decay, from causes inherent in

[28] P. 544. [29] FDF, pp. 461–3.
[30] The oppression, rather than persecution, obtaining under Domitian is recounted on pp. 531–3.
[31] The family of Philip the Arab are said to have been friendly to the Christians; pp. 554–5.
[32] Pp. 262–4 (ch. 10). [33] 'Superstition' is here used in its Roman, not its Humean, sense.
[34] P. 555.

Roman history; and furthermore, they are incompatible with the enthusiasm that is making Christians a separate society under the increasing authority of bishops. Cyprian is mentioned among Gibbon's sources,[35] and the association of pride with humility may well refer to him; but his idea of apostolic episcopacy leads him to challenge the primacy of Rome, and Decius would have had to look centuries ahead to foresee popes who claimed to create and depose emperors. Even in the short term, Gibbon lacks a contemporary historian who narrates this turning point in detail,[36] and he is beginning to rely on conjectural history and hypotheses that cannot be verified by evidence. A change is occurring, too profound to be noticed by immediate observers. Decius is the first emperor to aim at reducing the authority of bishops, and this is to transform the character of persecution. Cyprian perishes under his successor Valerian, but from the accession of the weak but well-meaning Gallienus, the Christians enjoy a forty-year peace, which – ominously if not causally – coincides with the general crisis of the third century. By the time the Illyrian soldier-emperors have restored the *res publica*, the authority of bishops has vastly increased. They have become rich, corrupt and theologically disputatious; the story of Paul of Samosata is told to bring all these characteristics together;[37] and we are at the point where Tillemont wondered whether persecution was not necessary to the health of the Church.[38]

It is no surprise, therefore, to find the policy of Decius resumed as Diocletian sets about reorganising the empire restored by the Illyrians; but there are problems Gibbon must confront and he is not far from having to re-narrate his history in the light of the rise of the Church. Diocletian, he tells us, was too level-headed and realistic an emperor to engage in persecution for the sake of his own convictions; we must look for the reasons that moved him to abandon religious peace;[39] but an ideological change has occurred, in response to the increased aggressiveness of the Christians. Paganism is perceived as under attack, and the gods of polytheism are being marshalled as a single army of defence. It is here that we at last encounter the philosophers whom all previous historians had made principal actors in the history of Christianity since the Mission to the Gentiles. The neo-Platonists, last heard of at the close of chapter 13, re-emerge as chapter 16 nears its climax.

The pagans, says Gibbon, began to feel 'some sentiments of faith and reverence', which had been no part of their culture until now.

[35] Pp. 554–5, nn. 118, 122.
[36] His sources are Eusebius and Lactantius (nn. 120–1), neither of whom he thinks reliable.
[37] Pp. 555–8. [38] Above, pp. 61–3, 83–6. [39] Pp. 558–62.

The supernatural powers assumed by the Church inspired at the same time terror and emulation. The followers of the established religion[40] entrenched themselves behind a similar fortification of prodigies; invented new modes of sacrifice, of expiation, and of initiation; attempted to revive the credit of their expiring oracles; and listened with eager credulity to every impostor who flattered their prejudices by a tale of wonders.[41] Both parties seemed to acknowledge the truth of those miracles which were claimed by their adversaries; and while they were contented with ascribing them to the arts of magic, and to the power of daemons, they mutually concurred in restoring and establishing the reign of superstition. Philosophy, her most dangerous enemy, was now converted into her most useful ally. The groves of the Academy, the gardens of Epicurus, and even the portico of the Stoics, were almost deserted, as so many different schools of scepticism or impiety;[42] and many among the Romans were desirous that the writings of Cicero should be condemned and suppressed by the authority of the senate.[43] The prevailing sect of the new Platonicians judged it prudent to connect themselves with the priests,[44] whom perhaps they despised, against the Christians, whom they had reason to fear. These fashionable philosophers prosecuted the design of extracting allegorical wisdom from the fictions of the Greek poets; instituted mysterious rites of devotion for the use of their chosen disciples; recommended the worship of the ancient gods as the emblems or ministers of the Supreme Deity, and composed against the faith of the Gospel many elaborate treatises, which have since been committed to the flames by the prudence of orthodox emperors.[45]

A philosophy essentially sceptical – this is what Gibbon's Rome has to do with Athens – has destroyed itself by too successful an attack on a superstition that inevitably re-asserts itself. The Christian claim to miracles is their most potent weapon, but the renewal of superstition does not make a counter-claim to the same powers. It takes the form of philosophy, which is closer to enthusiasm than to superstition, and the need for this has been felt as Athenian philosophy declines. Julia Mamaea and the family of Philip listen attentively to Origen, as Gallienus did to Plotinus.[46] The latter's concern with theurgy classes him with the mystics and therefore the enthusiasts; but the function of his philosophy is here to reinforce superstition, by justifying the gods as types or symbols of God as the neo-Platonists see him. The Christian condemnation of the gods as demons is deflected by representing them as daemons in the creative sense of the word, but for Gibbon all demonology is superstition; the triumph of the

[40] A new description, here occurring for the first time.
[41] Apollonius of Tyana is mentioned, though Gibbon agrees with Lardner that Philostratus did not intend him to be an anti-Christ (p. 560 n. 138).
[42] How far would Gibbon question this description?
[43] See n. 140, where Julian is associated with this demand.
[44] It is usually Mosheim, not Gibbon, who emphasises their role.
[45] Pp. 560–1. [46] Pp. 287 (Gallienus), 553, 554.

latter will come when the cults of the gods are replaced by the cults of saints, miracles and angels.

In Gibbon's narrative the new religion captures polytheism and remakes it in its own image; neo-Platonism does more to further this process than to resist Christianity. It is Gilbert Murray's 'failure of nerve',[47] given that the nerve is rather that of Roman Stoicism than of Victorian rationalism. Nothing, however, could be much farther from Mosheim's narrative, in which the school of Ammonius Sacca and Plotinus offers to absorb Christianity into a synthesis of philosophies, and succeeds in invading it and transforming it from within, in a variety of directions – theology, monasticism, episcopacy – to which Gibbon was as hostile as Mosheim was. It is emerging as a central feature of the two chapters that he abandoned the history of philosophy to tell the story in terms of a Humean dialectic between superstition and enthusiasm. In this chapter, however, the neo-pagan philosophers appear in a specific context: that of persecution, as a deliberate policy of state and on a larger scale than ever before, which Gibbon finds easier to explain than to narrate. He knows, that is, that Diocletian's decision to support Galerius's demand for systematic attack on the structure of the Christian Church was taken only after hesitation, discussion and sustained pressure[48] – not to mention two highly suspicious fires in the emperor's own palace – but he is without any historian with the powers of Tacitus or Sarpi, who might make him present at these councils and know who took part in them or how. Lactantius does not satisfy him,[49] and he must rely on intelligent conjecture. 'It may be presumed', he says; 'perhaps they represented'; and:

> The Christians (it might speciously be alleged), renouncing the gods and the institutions of Rome, had constituted a distinct republic, which might yet be suppressed before it had acquired any military force; but which was already governed by its own laws and magistrates, was possessed of a public treasure[50] and was intimately connected in all its parts by the frequent assemblies of the bishops, to whose decrees their numerous and opulent congregations yielded an implicit obedience.

Perhaps it occurred to Gibbon that these were very like arguments in the councils of Richelieu or Louis XIV; but it is not clear that he considered them specious.

[47] For the genesis of this concept, suggested to Murray by J. B. Bury, see Pelikan, 1987, pp. 89–90. Murray found the nadir of his 'failure' in gnosticism.

[48] Pp. 562–6, 570. [49] P. 562 n. 147.

[50] P. 493: 'The bishop was the natural steward of the Church; the public stock was intrusted to his care without account or control.'

Arguments like these may seem to have determined the reluctant mind of Diocletian to embrace a new system of persecution; but though we may suspect, it is not in our power to relate, the secret intrigues of the palace . . . and all those trifling but decisive causes which so often influence the fate of empires and the councils of the wisest monarchs.[51]

A Tacitean conclusion; we are now in a world of palaces and courts, and have moved away from one of liberal magistrates reluctantly enforcing the *police* of civil society. Gibbon's language is less that of conjectural history in the Scottish sense of the term than of the classical device of fictitious speeches expressing what was probably at stake. The persecution proceeds, aimed less at the persons of the Christians, or at forcing them to burn incense on Caesar's altar, than at destroying their buildings and books. The new Platonism reappears.

The philosophers, who now assumed the unworthy office of directing the blind zeal of persecution, had diligently studied the nature and genius of the Christian religion; and as they were not ignorant that the speculative doctrines of the faith were supposed to be contained in the writings of the prophets, of the Evangelists, and of the Apostles, they most probably suggested [conjecture again] the order that the bishops and presbyters should deliver all their sacred books into the hands of the magistrates; who were commanded, under the severest penalties, to burn them in a public and solemn manner.[52]

Only a revelation reduced to writing – one might want to say – could produce a world in which philosophers burned books; but hermeticists and neo-Platonists were not immune from supposing that their books conveyed the *gnōsis* of a *logos* immanent if not incarnate. The 'prudent' and 'orthodox emperors' who burned their treatises[53] came after Diocletian and Galerius.

Gibbon proceeds through the narrative of the last and greatest of the persecutions, which is increasingly a narrative of the wars of the tetrarchs after the abdication of Diocletian. It is a fundamental dichotomy, if not an incoherence, not only in the *Decline and Fall* but in the historiographical culture of his time, that imperial and ecclesiastical histories were still written separately, so that the narrative of chapter 13 had to be retold in chapter 16, and we are never quite told whether the power and wealth of the Christian community had grown to the point where toleration and persecution were rival policies strengthening or weakening the competitors for empire. It would have strengthened Gibbon's argument if he could

[51] P. 563 for all quotations here. [52] P. 564. [53] Above, p. 299.

have said outright that the competition for the one could not be carried out without the choice between destroying or enlisting the other; but the history of the Church is still so far an anti-history in his mind that he never says so. After Galerius repents, issues an edict of toleration and dies, persecution is continued by Maximin, under whom there is a plan to erect paganism into an anti-church, with its own hierarchy and property;[54] but the judicious Constantius keeps the western provinces (where philosophers are rare) detached from these conflicts, and Maximin, with the 'prophets or philosophers' he raises to the government of provinces,[55] is overthrown by Constantine, who

> at length deserved the appellation of the first emperor who publicly professed and established the Christian religion. The motives of his conversion, as they may variously be deduced from benevolence, from policy, from conviction, or from remorse, and the progress of the revolution, which, under his powerful influence and that of his sons, rendered Christianity the reigning religion of the Roman empire, will form a very interesting and important chapter in the second volume of this history.[56]

One would like to make these words the conclusion, as they are the climax, of Gibbon's first volume. They are not, because persecution is not the precondition of establishment; but the converse may be true. After estimating the number of those who died in the last imperial persecutions at under 2,000, Gibbon goes on to point out that the persecution of Christians by Christians has far exceeded those of the Roman empire, and gives Grotius's figure – 100,000 – and Sarpi's – half that number – of Protestants massacred by Catholics in the religious wars of the Netherlands. If we doubt these numbers, he says in conclusion, we should be far more sceptical when reading Eusebius;[57] but in fact the latter does not give a general estimate, but only talks about the persecutions in the cloudy and rhetorical manner usual in Fathers of the Church, thus encouraging the even wilder language of subsequent monks.[58] Persecution by Christians[59] occurs in a different cultural universe from that of persecution by pagan emperors, and must be explained differently.

[54] Galerius, p. 574; Maximin, pp. 575–6.
[55] P. 575, lines 18–20. An allusion to Sossianus Hierocles, governor of Egypt and promoter of Apollonius?
[56] P. 571.
[57] Pp. 580–1. Gibbon seems a little hesitant about early modern numbers, let alone ancient.
[58] Pp. 566–80.
[59] 'A melancholy truth', says Gibbon (p. 580). The twentieth century of course adds another.

(iv) the two chapters revisited

We shall not be done with the two chapters until we have considered their reception: the response of critics, beginning with Hugh Blair, their criticisms and refutations, and Gibbon's response, such as it was, to them. The ensuing controversy has made a permanent impact upon our reading of the *Decline and Fall*, and is part of its history. Study of it, however, has been deferred until the two chapters have been, first, examined in the context provided by ecclesiastical historiography; second, read and interpreted as the series of statements they appear to make directly and to imply. To proceed in this way has methodological implications of its own. In the first place, it privileges the author above the reader, as is not currently much in fashion. The readers are to have their turn, but first we make our own attempt to discover what Gibbon was saying, doing or meaning, and whether the context in which he was acting was that in which his critics supposed he carried out his intentions. In the second place, this procedure privileges Gibbon's text, and other texts considered as supplying it with a context. This is to differ from the approach preferred by David Womersley, the doyen of living Gibbon scholars, in his study of the problems presented by the two chapters and by other writings of our author. He assembles the bibliographic and documentary evidence available regarding Gibbon's composition of these chapters, and suggests that we do not understand Gibbon's intentions and execution of them until this evidence has been taken into account. This is undeniable, and Womersley's reading of the chapters is invaluable. The procedure adopted here – that of going from the text to other texts, establishing them as context, and returning to the text – entails making other assumptions, selecting as relevant contexts other than those yielded by the bibliographic evidence, and so arriving at other understandings of Gibbon's intentions and performances. The differences between such approaches are therefore matters of selection and emphasis, and this chapter need claim only to have illuminated the problem in one way rather than another. Here it is worth quoting Womersley:

> The three forms of literary study brought together in the making of this book might be thought to create a kind of trinity. But if so, it must be said at once that the doctrine of the literary trinity is Arian, not Athanasian. The father is bibliography, the spirit is context, but close reading is only the son. It is a later, dependent and subordinate activity which can be practised with safety only within the boundaries marked out for it by its senior colleagues.[60]

[60] Womersley, 2002, p. 9.

If I may pursue this frighteningly august analogy, I will venture to offer a trinity of equals, not of subordinates. Close reading remains the Son, but the text is the Word and the context is the Flesh. The other persons it may be well to leave undefined, but the role of the Spirit may perhaps be played by Michael Oakeshott's 'conversation of mankind'. Whether it leaves the relations of Father to Son unmodified opens up the problem of history. Gibbon – I will remark on withdrawing from the disputation – became increasingly an Athanasian.

Giving priority to a close reading of the text of the two chapters, we set ourselves to solve a series of problems, about Gibbon's intentions and his performance in them. In the first place, why did he write them when he did and publish them as he did? It was pointed out at the beginning of this volume that he might have proceeded direct, as his text suggests that he was about to do, to Constantine's establishment of Christianity as the religion of the empire, declining to provide any history of the early Church beyond its condition at, and as affected by, the moment of establishment. Why did he think a history of the Church before Constantine necessary, and what history do the two chapters provide? There is the further question: why did he publish this history as the conclusion to his first volume, rather than as an introduction to the second, when it would have been read very differently from its reception in the form which he gave it? Gibbon will not have intended that five years should go by, during which the two chapters were read in isolation from his still unpublished and unwritten history, and came to be considered the programme by which the latter was to be judged and even the end to which it was being written.

We cannot escape answering these questions in the light of our information about what these chapters contain and our hypotheses about how they are to be interpreted. At this point, however, we do possess information drawn from outside the immediate texts. From Gibbon's autobiographies and his letters, we know that he found the ecclesiastical part of his first volume difficult to write, that he reduced it radically, in a series of revisions, from its original size, and that he was working on these revisions when the rest of Volume I had already been printed, six months before it was published. He adds that he could have wished them to be even further reduced.[61] This information gives us ground for supposing that it had become important to him to write an account of pre-Constantinian ecclesiastical history, that he had to labour against the calendar to complete it, and – more conjecturally – that he may not have completed it in

[61] Above, pp. 6–7.

the form he wished. Anyone who has written a doctoral dissertation will recognise this predicament, and will know that it often arises in the process of composition and needs no further explanation. It may, however, have implications and consequences greater than its causes.

If we now enquire what Gibbon did, i.e. achieved, in the two chapters – which should up to a point inform us concerning what he 'was doing', i.e. intended, plus or minus what he achieved – the two preceding chapters of this volume offer an explication. He seems to have turned away from a confrontation of Gospel Christianity with Hellenistic philosophy, in order to confront it with polytheist civil society. This enabled him to narrate, rather than explain, two processes which he selected as the subjects of his two chapters: first, how Christianity had spread in late antique society and why it had been persecuted; second, how in this process it had become an organised body or 'republic', under its own magistrates whose authority was rather spiritual than civil – the essential distinction between ancient history and modern – and capable in time of competing with imperial authority and even, if one looked far enough ahead, of usurping and annexing it. He treated this religion as a new culture – in his own parlance, a new system of manners – and saw it less as weakening or undermining Roman imperial culture than as replacing it, though much of the older culture would survive this transformation.

It seems possible to imagine Gibbon as so far stimulated and excited by the perception that this history could be written that he was possessed by the need to complete writing it, and sent his sheets to the printer for immediate publication, for no reason subtler than that. Whatever its cause, the decision – was there a decision? – to write and publish them as a coda to the 1776 volume had consequences of which not all were benign. It was a creative move to substitute the encounter with polytheism for the encounter with philosophy, since it made possible a Humean philosophical history of Christianity as revolutionary enthusiasm questioning even its own authority; but it radically curtailed the history of heresy and orthodoxy shaping each other, which was essential to the history of that authority. Gibbon may at one time have intended something more. The account of Zoroaster in chapter 8 of the *Decline and Fall*[62] can now be seen as looking towards Beausobre and the histories of gnosticism and Manichaeism; but the account of gnosticism in chapter 15 is astonishingly curtailed and presents it as little more than the anti-Judaism of Gentile converts to Christianity. Gibbon admired Beausobre's history but hardly

[62] DF, 1, ch. 8; pp. 215–21; BSE, pp. 25–36.

used it. Similarly, the account of the neo-Platonists as philosophers seduced into magic stands in strange isolation at the end of chapter 13,[63] and it is tempting to regard it as a paragraph surviving from an older text now revised and curtailed; and the account of them in chapter 16, as philosophers seduced into persecution, falls far short of Mosheim's account of how the school of Alexandria threatened the religion of Christ with syncretism and corrupted it with esotericism. Gibbon's turn to the Latin west reduced chapter 15 to containing a woefully inadequate account of the role of philosophy in the age before Constantine. Only in chapters 21 and 47 do we find him returning to the master historians in search of the role of Platonism in generating the authority of the Councils and the heresies there defined as such.

When these chapters appeared Gibbon would rejoin the mainstream of ecclesiastical history, from which chapters 15 and 16 are in important ways departures; but they mark points at which controversy went on within the conversation among Christians. Chapter 21 leads the reader to the Council of Nicaea, chapter 47 to the Councils of Chalcedon and Ephesus, and these are events which Christians were long accustomed to debating among themselves. As Gibbon himself noted,[64] no subsequent chapter of the *Decline and Fall* occasioned scandal as chapters 15 and 16 did; but by the time the later chapters appeared, his image as an unbelieving historian was fixed to all posterity. The present enquiry is still engaged in finding out how this happened. As we have repeatedly seen, Hugh Blair, his first critic, was sure that Gibbon was 'attacking religion', but that doing so was 'unhistorical and not to the purpose'. This may be read as implying that Gibbon had historical purposes, which he pursued past the point where they ceased to support an attack on religion which he continued to carry on. His modern readers for the most part maintain that the two chapters offer an Enlightened and secular explanation of the spread of Christianity which precluded the thesis that this came about through divine action. This may indeed be what his critics thought that he intended to do, but as at least one of them perceived,[65] such a project must encounter historical as well as religious difficulties. There exists, therefore, and has existed since 1776, an alternative thesis: that Gibbon attacked Christianity, not through a secular reinterpretation, but by means of a sustained tone of irreverence, irony and innuendo, which placed his unbelief beyond the reach of contradiction. The two readings are brought together by those who hold that irony and innuendo were possible and necessary because in Gibbon's mind, historical

[63] Pp. 398–9. [64] A, pp. 322–3 (Memoir E). [65] James Chelsum; below, pp. 318–21.

understanding had superseded all other means of comprehending religious phenomena.

The present study has enquired what historical interpretations are put forward in the two chapters, and whether they arrive at the point identified by Blair, after which Gibbon's 'attack on religion' has to be interpreted. The point at which both chapters seem to culminate is the rise of an organised clergy, capable of governing the Church as a 'republic' within the imperial structure, with all that implies for subsequent history. In this, if not in the use of the word 'republic', Gibbon is avowedly following the orthodox Lutheran Mosheim (himself at some distance from the more radical Thomasius);[66] the argument is certainly Protestant, and need not be considered Enlightened until it is suggested that the intellectual foundations of the clergy's claim to spiritual authority are themselves false. This may be achieved without departing from an avowed Christianity, by opposing the Platonising theology debated by the Fathers and the Councils to a simple or naked gospel that proclaims without defining the divinity of Christ; but a point worth calling Enlightenment in a more radical sense is reached if it is suggested that the gospel is itself unreliable and the divinity of Christ open to redefinition. The nearest approach to this suggestion we have encountered in the two chapters is Gibbon's insistence that the Gospel miracles are unreported by pagan authors.

Gibbon has not embarked on systematic criticism of Christianity in the two chapters. He has avoided – and will bring up only after it has become the established religion of the empire – all but a selective and somewhat eccentric treatment of the debate over Christ's nature, and the formation of heresies and orthodoxies, which may have begun in the Apostles' time and certainly went on in the age of the Fathers and the persecutions. His predecessors since Eusebius had agreed in presenting a history of debate first with gnostics and afterwards with neo-Platonists; but he avoids this – at the cost of presenting the gnostics as anti-Nazarenes and the neo-Platonists as persecutors – in order to confront intolerant Christianity with polytheism as the civil religion of the empire. By doing so, he enables himself to write a philosophical, Humean and therefore Enlightened history that offers to explain both how the Christians came to be persecuted (if not why their persecutors ultimately gave up the attempt) and how they acquired the crusading zeal which triumphed over polytheism (if not why the polytheists were willing to be defeated). Is this the history to which 'attacking religion'

[66] This point was made to me by Mack Walker.

was 'not to the purpose'? Are there ways to be found in which it led to a criticism of belief?

His adversaries and admirers have agreed in thinking so. It is supposed that by ignoring the 'primary' cause for the spread of Christianity and offering five 'secondary' causes of a historical character, Gibbon undermined the doctrine that it expanded in the world in consequence of sacred or divine action. There are, however, important reasons why he could not have done this. The periods of immediate divine action in Christian history were two: the period covered by the Gospels when Christ was on earth, and the period beginning on the day of Pentecost, when the Apostles were infused by extraordinary powers supposed to have lasted for their lifetimes. It was crucial to Christian historiography that the canonical narrative related only part of the latter period and left most of it unreported; but Protestants if not Catholics agreed that miraculous authority had ceased at or after the death of the last Apostle, after which began the age of those whom Gibbon quite incontrovertibly called 'the uninspired teachers of the gospel', and whose actions supplied Mosheim with his 'internal' history of the Church. Le Clerc had asked what if any divine power had ensured that the truth had continued to be propagated after that moment, and had concluded that it could only be Providence, a necessarily ill-defined agency which directed the actions – and words? – of fallible men and women towards divinely chosen ends. Under this heading all history might be written; but it was possible to write so much history that Providence ceased to be mentioned. To perceive its workings was an act of faith, not critical intellect.

Gibbon several times exploited the ironic possibilities of Providence.[67] It is under that head that he gives most ground for holding that he conveyed his unbelief by means of innuendo, and perhaps it was because Providence was too unspecific a concept to be systematically doubted that he was able, or obliged, to do this. But it cannot be said that he replaced a sacred by a secular narrative of post-apostolic history, for the reason that no such sacred history existed for Protestants like himself. Mosheim, an orthodox Lutheran, had indicated what history they could write without one; Tillemont, an orthodox Catholic, had shown that he could write much effective history with one. It is not necessarily because Gibbon had no belief in Providence at all – as he surely had not – that his historical intellect ranged far beyond either.

Any sacred history he might wish to demolish lay in a time more remote than any he wrote of: the era of the Gospels, the pentecostal narrative, and

[67] Pp. 447, 448–9, 465, 510 (ch. 15), 525 (ch. 16).

more generally the age of the Apostles.[68] His sole foray into that era was his treatment of the darkness at the Crucifixion, and anything we might build on this must be limited to his use of indirect language. The time had not arrived when one could engage in systematic historical criticism of the Gospel narrative – excepting only the Erasmian and Simonian criticism of the canonical texts – and only with such post-canonical figures as the second-century Fathers could late humanist scholarship find ground. Gibbon's use of innuendo therefore began where his capacity to write history ceased, and it is in this light that we must consider Blair's judgement that his 'attacking religion' was 'unhistorical'. If it is extra-critical and implicit, it either bears a necessary relation to his historical writing, or it does not. Perhaps Gibbon's final stroke is to leave this question undetermined; but having done so, he must continue to write history, for purposes not limited to the exploitation of irony, and these purposes too must remain part of his intentions.

It cannot be maintained – though it long has been – that the five secondary causes of chapter 15 offer a secular explanation of the growth of Christianity that replaces the sacred primary cause. The latter is indeed neglected; one can see that Gibbon did not believe in it; but the five causes as the chapter displays them are in reality so many causes why men and women in an age without inspiration should come to believe in the primary narrative of the Christian mysteries. Among these reasons the enthusiasm that was the consequence of ceasing to believe in the pagan gods is perhaps the most interesting to a philosophical historian such as Gibbon; but he gives nearly equal space to the belief in miracles, persisting as it did into the second century and beyond. To know as we do that Gibbon was close to Middleton on this issue is to know how close either might come to doubting the greater mysteries of the orthodox narrative; but at this point Gibbon considers the nature of faith and turns from it to indicate a Humean scepticism consisting of a suspension of judgement likely to prove permanent.

Such scepticism was retrospective; it cast doubt on the capacity of the uninspired to transmit the information and doctrine received from the inspired who had preceded them. To doubt the later authorities was to doubt the earlier; but so long as the means of criticism existed only for the later – in this case the Fathers – doubt about the former must be indirectly

[68] I differ here from David Wootton (Womersley, 1997a, p. 216) who thinks that 'chapters 15 and 16 were obliged to cover the same period as the Gospel narratives and the Epistles'. I argue that Gibbon was not so obliged, but has been persistently and perhaps inevitably read as if he had intended that coverage.

expressed and must take the form of innuendo. Doubt unconstrained by criticism must become doubt without limits, as had been discovered in the pyrrhonist controversy of the generations preceding Gibbon's. Among the many critics of the last chapters of his 1776 volume were those who thought his irony and innuendo the expression of an irreligion without limits, and also thought – as Blair probably did not – that he was writing history with the sole object of arriving at that degree of scepticism.

PART IV

Controversy and continuation

Irony was the Fortune of Athens; Rome came
to pluck the Fortune of Athens, and stand embattled
as in arms, so in mind against evil luck . . .
till on a day from a hill in the middle of Athens
where men adored Irony the unknown lord,
Paul sent over Athens and Rome his call:
'whom ye ignorantly worship, him I declare'.

Charles Williams
The Region of the Summer Stars

CHAPTER 10

The reception of the two chapters and the invention of the author

To turn from the question of Gibbon's intentions and performance in writing chapters 15 and 16 of the *Decline and Fall* to that of their reception in the years preceding publication of his second volume is to encounter the question of how his respondents interpreted these intentions and whether their interpretations coincide with those of a historian today. This is in turn to encounter two further problems. The language used by Gibbon of which his critics complained was indirect and allusive; they interpreted it as conveying a set of intentions subversive of revealed Christianity. The historian seeking to estimate Gibbon's intentions encounters the same problem of indirectness, and must decide how far they were as subversive as their critics said they were. It is a further problem, however, that most historians until very recently, being agnostic and post-Christian, have taken as granted a process of Enlightenment amounting to a subversion of Christianity, in which Gibbon took part. As a curious consequence of this assumption, they have on the one hand despised Gibbon's Christian critics as impotent defenders of a religion doomed to subversion, while on the other accepting an account of his intentions as subversive as indistinguishable from that of his adversaries. They agree that Gibbon intended to subvert the Christian revelation by irony and innuendo, while accepting and applauding his success in doing so. This interpretation may well be correct; but since both Christian critics and post-Christian historians rest it on the same reading of language which does not declare its intentions, they share the same difficulty in deciding how far this reading should be carried. When intentions are not declared and may have been concealed, it is hard to stop short of maximising them. It is for this reason that historians are and should be wary of imputing an esoteric or secret meaning to a written text; yet when Gibbon declares his intention and practice of remaining silent in reply to his critics, he gives us to understand that he has something to be silent about.

In studying the controversy over the two chapters – it is a controversy to the extent that Gibbon made a limited reply to his critics, though he seems to have found no articulate supporters in its course – we must therefore return to the question of what he intended by them (there is of course the possibility that he was not sure of this himself). We cannot deal with this, however, without asking what his critics thought he intended; and since they complained of what he did not say, we cannot separate what they thought he had left unsaid from what they thought he ought to have said but had not. They lived in a climate of belief – conscious of being challenged – and if he was an unbeliever, so did he. The historian needs to know what Gibbon did not believe (assuming that he did not) and, since belief was a public matter, is entitled to interrogate his contemporaries as to what that may have been. The agnostic climate of the last century, however, made it easy to suppose that the beliefs of the orthodox could be disregarded, and Gibbon's critics were dismissed as 'unreadable'.[1] In recent years there has occurred a massive and strictly historical revival of the need to know what the orthodox thought, and it is possible as well as desirable to read his critics and find out what that was. This chapter rests upon recent research[2] in its attempt to give them such a reading, and to return to Gibbon's text in the light this may give. Since it is a premise of the present volume that chapters 15 and 16 made their impact before Gibbon's history of the Church in the empire had begun appearing, the enquiry is limited to responses published between 1776 and 1781, when his second volume was published.

(1) 'THE HEAVY TROOPS': CHELSUM AND WATSON

The first volume of the *Decline and Fall* was published in February 1776. Its success, as well as its scandal, led to a second edition in August, and during that interval there is evidence that Gibbon knew he was about to face clerical criticism. There is not much, apart from the text itself, to tell us what he intended or expected while writing and rewriting the two chapters during July and August of 1775, but between the two editions the following year he made textual alterations which tell us he was modifying

[1] Norton, 1940, as quoted by Aston, 1997, p. 253; whom see for an anthology of similar judgements.

[2] The pioneer study remains that of Shelby T. McCloy, [1933], now outmoded and in some ways naïve, but still indispensable. For recent work see Womersley, 1988, 1994, 1997a, 1997b, 2000, 2002, 2004; Turnbull, 1982, 1991, 1997; Wootton, 1997; Aston, 1995, 1997; Young, 1997, 1998a, 2000; Pocock, 1985b, 2000, 2009. The historiographic setting in which these stand is that established by Clark, 2000, and Young, 1998b and 2000. My debt to all these scholars is incalculable, but special acknowledgements are due to Womersley, Aston and Young.

and sometimes sharpening the passages which were angering readers in the Christian clergy.[3] He alluded to the forthcoming attacks in his letters during these months, and affected to regard them as concerted and slightly ridiculous. His language reflects a conventional contempt for the clergy; how far, and in what senses, it is systematically anti-clerical or irreligious is a further question.

The controversial temperature of Church of England divinity was not yet high at the beginning of the year 1776. Rebellion in the American colonies was to raise ecclesiastical and doctrinal issues, but these were not yet the matter of general debate. Historians have recently emphasised that the established Church had weathered the storms raised by Benjamin Hoadly in the previous reign.[4] The Feathers Tavern petition of 1772 had indeed opened up a minefield with its indication of a widespread anti-Trinitarianism within the Church as well as outside it, seeking relief from the obligation to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles and even from the exclusion of non-Anglicans from public office. Such demands were to take on almost revolutionary overtones in the 1780s, but for the present the petition had been rejected and Arians, Socinians and unitarians were faced with the choice between leaving the Church and abstaining from public debate within it.[5] Between 1776 and 1781 it is hard to detect much anti-Trinitarian presence in the controversy over the two chapters, and the attack upon them was to come from the liberal left as well as the orthodox right. In consequence, the associations with which Gibbon was tarred were retrospective, looking back to the deism of the early part of the eighteenth century.

As early as May 1776 Gibbon was informing Georges Deyverdun that the two chapters were being represented as 'une satire de la Religion Chretienne[,] satire d'autant plus dangereuse qu'elle est deguisée du voile du moderation et de l'impartialité', and that to 'l'horreur de ce procedé' he would oppose only 'un silence respectueux',[6] the tactic he was to claim in his autobiographies to have consistently followed.[7] By 19 October he was telling Holroyd that 'the attack on me is begun . . . The heavy troops, Watson and another are on their march.'[8] James Chelsum's anonymous *Remarks on the Two Last Chapters of Mr Gibbon's History* had appeared two days before the date of this letter, and Richard Watson's *Apology for Christianity in a Series of Letters Addressed to Edward Gibbon, Esq*. was to

[3] Womersley, 2002, ch. 1.
[4] Clark, 2000; Womersley, 1997b, p. xxi and n. 30, 2002, pp. 48–52, 108–11.
[5] Haakonssen, 1996, follows this movement in both established and dissenting settings.
[6] *Letters*, II, pp. 107–8. [7] A, p. 319 (Memoir E). [8] *Letters*, II, pp. 117, 118.

follow at the end of the month. Gibbon does not state the sources of his information, which may have been oral, but he could have known from the literary journals of the day that an indignant response was general. The *Gentleman's Magazine*, hostile from the start, had declared in its August issue that

> the venom of our author's tenets is too apparent . . . though more disguised, and with the same weapons, however blunted, that have so often and so openly been used in the schools of Battersea and Ferney.[9]

Here were the two charges against Gibbon that were to be maintained throughout the controversy: that his attack on Christianity was indirect and disguised, and that it was identical with the deism of Bolingbroke and Voltaire. It has been the argument of this series of volumes that Gibbon was not a deist believing (as Bolingbroke said he did) in the laws of nature and of nature's God, but a sceptic like David Hume, whose *Dialogues on Natural Religion* he had read and approved before publication. If he held that the existence of God could not be established by natural reason, he was a sceptic but not a deist;[10] it would follow, however, that he was an unbeliever but not an atheist, least of all in the 'Spinozistic' sense in which that term was commonly used (and which Bolingbroke had been anxious to reject by insisting that the world had had a beginning).[11] Atheists believed too much; they thought they knew how the world was constituted, and were capable of fanaticism and even enthusiasm.[12] The debate with Gibbon went on in the world of the Moderate, not the Radical Enlightenment, as these terms are now used;[13] but the question Gibbon left unanswered, and his adversaries thought he was answering in the negative by his silence, was whether the limitations of reason pointed to the necessity of revelation.

The *Critical Review* and *Monthly Review*, both more open than the *Gentleman's Magazine* to the possibility of a debatable theology, were ahead of it in reviewing the *Decline and Fall* and initially more friendly to the latter. The *Critical Review* began its review in February 1776, the *Monthly Review* in March, and when the former reached the two chapters in April the reviewer remarked:

[9] *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1776, no. 46, p. 366.

[10] The term 'deist' was used more generally, to cover all brands of scepticism. Perhaps this is the usage recently adopted by Womersley, e.g. 2002, pp. 19–20, 39–41, 51–4, 79, 82, who employs it to denote Gibbon's irreligious tone, rather than any philosophical position. See also Womersley, 1997b, pp. xv–xvi, xviii.

[11] Bolingbroke, 1841, III, 'Essays on human knowledge', passim.

[12] This charge was to reach its peak in the anti-revolutionary writings of Burke.

[13] Jacob, 1981, 1992; Israel, 2001, 2006.

Mr Gibbon afterwards develops, with great precision, the several causes which he has assigned for the growth of Christianity, explaining their operation by a variety of learned and judicious remarks, which not only display the historical information of the author, but at the same time afford the clearest evidence of his philosophical sagacity and discernment. We regret that the limits of a Review will not permit us to enter into a particular detail of this part of the work; but we cannot avoid recommending it to the perusal of our readers, as being replete with interesting sentiments and pertinent observations.[14]

Less cautiously, the *Monthly Review* pronounced in July that the subject of chapter 15 was

extremely curious and important, but of a very delicate nature. It is indeed scarce possible for an impartial historian to treat it in such a manner as to be approved by all the different denominations of Christians; – such is the diversity of their views, prejudices, and interests! The account, for example, which Mr Gibbon gives of the rise and progress of the hierarchy, though in our opinion a very just and candid account, must, it may reasonably be presumed, prove unsatisfactory to a very large and respectable class of readers, many of whom may think it prudent to conceal the *real* ground of their disapprobation,[15]

as in fact they did not; the *Monthly* was aiming at the established clergy. We have here a clear indication of how responses to the *Decline and Fall* could differ along lines laid down by debates within and without the Church since 1772; but it may be possible to detect a change of tone in both *Reviews* once they were aware of Richard Watson's response to the two chapters.[16] If Chelsum, a student of Christ Church, Oxford,[17] wrote from within the citadels of establishment and orthodoxy, Watson, Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, was a horse of another colour. An associate of Edmund Law of Peterhouse, the centre of a group willing to regard the Articles as discussable, he owed his chair – for which his qualifications had been late in appearing – to support from the unorthodox and indeed libertine duke of Grafton.[18] He was an open supporter of the liberty of private judgement, prepared to say as well as believe that unitarians were Christians.[19] He stood, in short, for every hope that relaxation of rigid

[14] *Critical Review*, 41 (April), 1776, pp. 269–70.

[15] *Monthly Review*, 55 (July), 1776, pp. 44–5. Note the strongly anti-Athanasian remarks in ibid., 54 (May), 1776, p. 388, in which a review of chapters 4–10 of the *Decline and Fall* begins to appear.

[16] See the *Critical* review of Watson, 42 (December), 1776, pp. 456–65, and the *Monthly*, vol. 46 (December), 1776, pp. 453–61.

[17] ODNB, xi, pp. 299–300.

[18] Ibid., lvii, pp. 646–9; support of Grafton, Rockingham and Shelburne, p. 648; defends Locke against Jenyns, ibid., Law his mentor, p. 649.

[19] See ibid., lvii, p. 648; McCloy, [1933], p. 95; Womersley, 2002, p. 108 n. 30. His memoirs (Watson, 1818) show that he was a follower of Hoadly in ecclesiology, of Locke in philosophy and of

Trinitarianism might be achieved from within the Church of England, and that even if subscription were required in public, theology might be discussed in private. That he should join Chelsum in defending revelation against Gibbon meant that even Rational Dissent – a series of positions reaching far beyond Watson's – had its own need of the sacred. One need not be an Athanasian to believe that Christ brought a revelation from God.

In the alternation now beginning between orthodox and less orthodox criticisms of the two chapters, Chelsum preceded Watson by the space of two weeks. After the complaint, soon to be universal, against the indirectness of Gibbon's language, he placed his finger on what we are coming to know as a central problem of ecclesiastical history.

> It should be remarked carefully, that it is not the author's design to account for the propagation of Christianity from its earliest date, but during a particular period only.
>
> The first, and most remarkable period of the history of its miraculous propagation, will not certainly, be found, to be concerned in his disquisitions, since it is not comprehended in his design. He will be found on examination, to have considered only, that later period, which commences after the times of the Apostles, and which exhibits to us not the first planting, but the successive increase of Christianity, after it had already taken root, and covered a very extensive tract of country.
>
> If any time he ascends higher, he deviates, strictly speaking, from his proper subject.[20]

Chelsum went on to suggest that, as Gibbon says his history of the empire begins at the death of Marcus Aurelius, his history of the Church can have begun no earlier.[21] He was making a debater's point; not exculpating Gibbon from the charge of meddling in sacred history, but intimating that he had done so after disqualifying himself. But when had 'the times of the Apostles' ended, and what had succeeded them? Le Clerc, it will be remembered, had given the date of AD 100, adding that direct inspiration – to which it would be possible to add miraculous powers – had then ceased, and that the history of the Church had thenceforth been guided by Providence.[22] But Providence did not work miracles; with occasional direct interventions it guided secular history – in Gibbon's words

Rockingham and Grafton in politics. He lost faith in Fox after the latter's coalition with North. He believed (p. 53) that he had been censured by Richard Hurd, who thought his criticism of Gibbon concealed a secret scepticism.

[20] [Chelsum], 1776, pp. 3–4; Womersley, 1997b, p. 2. Chelsum's punctuation followed.

[21] [Chelsum], 1776, pp. 4–5; Womersley, 1997b, pp. 2–3. [22] Above, pp. 128–32.

'the passions of the human heart and the general circumstances of mankind'[23] – to divinely ordered ends, by routes often mysterious and unfathomable. As Middleton had pointed out, to prolong miraculous action past this point was to risk falling into popery,[24] though it might be hard to deny its presence in the immediate post-apostolic era without seeming to deny it retrospectively. Chelsum, who liked to portray Gibbon as Middleton's follower,[25] was not unaware of this dilemma; but like all Gibbon's critics, he focused on the fact that chapter 15 was altogether unspecific in its chronology. Gibbon had spoken of 'the uninspired teachers and believers of the gospel';[26] his narrative seemed to move forward, from the post-Apostolic Fathers to the rise of the clergy and the actions of Constantine; but he had never formally disclaimed the intention of writing about the Apostles or the Gospel narrative. He was therefore open to the charge that he had indicated statements about the earlier period, but had done so indirectly and by innuendo. To this charge he responded with silence; but the more he did so, the more his silence was interpreted as innuendo, and the further the intentions conveyed by innuendo seemed to reach. Neither he as author, nor his critics, nor subsequent historians, have been able to escape this slippery slope, and he has been represented as its designer.[27]

Chelsum knew and in part quoted[28] Gibbon's acknowledgement of the primary cause for the spread of Christianity – 'the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself and the ruling providence of its great author' – but like all his other critics regarded Gibbon's refusal to follow this up as evidence that he did not believe in it and intended the secondary causes to replace it. Here Chelsum was in the difficulty that Gibbon had not directed much, even in the way of innuendo, against the primary cause. He must fall back on the strategy of trying to show that the secondary causes were either inadequate or mis-stated. He makes the rather strong point that if, as Gibbon had argued, personal immortality could not be demonstrated by philosophy, it was a revealed truth and its revelation must be counted a feature of the primary cause.[29] He goes on to argue that the

[23] Womersley, 1994, I, p. 487. [24] Above, pp. 224–5.
[25] Womersley, 1997b, pp. 11, 38 n. 130, 41 n. 141. [26] Womersley, 1994, I, p. 446.
[27] It will be seen that I differ here from Wootton, 1997 (see n. 68 to previous chapter), who assembles all Gibbon's ironies and implications into a grand project of subverting Christianity (herein following Gibbon's critics). I follow Hugh Blair's point that this was to depart from his historical narrative, and I remain open to the possibility that the two chapters lack coherence. The difference between Wootton and me is ultimately one of assumptions, and his chapter should be read with the greatest attention.
[28] Womersley, 1997b, p. 5. [29] Ibid., pp. 4–5.

Christian rejection of cultic religion may explain the conquering zeal of converts but leaves unexplained the willingness of pagans to be converted. The unlearned multitude would scarcely notice the philosophic scepticism of their masters,[30] and the Enlightened belief in the incurable superstition of the masses is on weak ground when confronting the Christian insistence that revelation has transformed and transcended human nature. If this revolution occurred in the ancient world, revelation must account for it.

Chelsum's argument, however, in turn stands on ground weakened by chapter 15's refusal to supply a counter-argument. Gibbon did not provide argument against the propagation of Christianity by divine action in the gospel and apostolic periods. It might have been unsafe for him to do so,[31] but he lacked any critical apparatus, beyond the texts of the Gospels, with which to challenge sacred history. All he had to say was that acceptance of such a narrative required a leap beyond reason into faith; and he expressed his preference for remaining within the limits of reason in a tone of irony which his critics one and all took for innuendo without limits.

He chose – or did he choose? – to leave chapter 15 without a chronological structure or a narrative of Christianity's spread, and preferred from the outset to leave it undefended except by a resolute silence. His opponents resented this silence and took it for innuendo. It further left them in a polemically confused predicament. They must choose between stating a case for divine action in a period which Gibbon had not examined, criticising his use of innuendo which they were tempted to exaggerate, arguing that the secondary causes were not adequate as replacements of the primary (which Gibbon had not suggested that they were), and criticising his deployment of these causes on grounds scholarly rather than religious. It is small wonder if they were angry, and unsurprising – the nature of controversy being what it is – if they sometimes employed all the above strategies without distinguishing sufficiently between them. It may be their use of the first and third of the four that tells us most about their beliefs and thinking.

Chelsum took issue with Gibbon on a number of points: the role of the gnostics, whom he considers the predecessors of modern disbelief;[32] the authority of the Apocalypse in the early Church;[33] the question of miracles, which he says need no further defence against the arguments of

[30] Ibid., pp. 4, 15–17.

[31] That Gibbon feared legal or ecclesiastical action in 1776 has not been much argued. Maclaine (below, p. 348) was to observe that he need no longer do so. It was to be Gibbon himself who recommended Priestley to the attention of the civil magistrate (A, p. 318).

[32] Womersley, 1997b, p. 6. [33] Ibid., pp. 9–10.

Hume;[34] the Christian condemnation of virtuous pagans, which Gibbon has exaggerated;[35] the numbers of the early martyrs and other Christians;[36] and the indifference of pagan writers to miracles including the darkness at the Crucifixion.[37] These were to be the themes of most critics, and it is perhaps only the matter of miracles, which Chelsum regards as settled, that raises fundamental questions of method and belief. It is also worth noticing the sentence:

> Nor have we yet descended, in the course of our author's history, into those times, in which the spirit of Christianity became corrupted, and the pure religion of Jesus, unhappily received into its bosom, the treacherous pageantry of paganism,[38]

as the first of many acknowledgements by critics that Gibbon's implied strictures were perfectly applicable to times leading to popery. The question was when those times had begun. It was possible, if dangerous, to date them from Constantine's establishment, or with Mosheim from Origen's encounter with Alexandrian philosophy. Only Middleton had gone so far as to date them directly from the post-Apostolic Fathers, by means that might cast doubt on the Apostles themselves. Chelsum was implicitly, perhaps unconsciously, raising the question why Gibbon had gone into pre-Constantinian history at all; had he only begun from the establishment, many of his innuendos would have been acceptable. The two chapters needed a clearer chronology.

This need reappears in Richard Watson's *Apology for Christianity*, a work standing somewhat apart from the Anglican orthodoxy of most though not all Gibbon's opponents.[39] Watson opened by vigorously asserting the rights of private judgement,[40] and though he was disavowing only intolerance towards Gibbon, this language cannot be free of the implications it bore after 1772. Did freedom of discussion imply that no decision was possible? He cannot have regarded Gibbon as an ally in the cause of liberal theology, and his title intimates that Christianity as a whole is in need of defending, though its enemies are those who draw conclusions from the two chapters which Watson hesitates to attribute to their author.[41] He is nearer than Chelsum to the *Gentleman's Magazine*'s linkage of Gibbon with the deism

[34] Ibid., p. 12. [35] Ibid., p. 11. [36] Ibid., pp. 17–18, 24–5, 31–4. [37] Ibid., pp. 18–21.

[38] [Chelsum], 1776, p. 33; Womersley, 1997b, p. 15. The original punctuation.

[39] For his account of his relations with Gibbon, see Watson, 1818, pp. 53–8. He says his leniency towards the *Decline and Fall* was noticed by George III. He had earlier in 1776 preached a university sermon on *The Principles of the Revolution Vindicated*, which the king and others thought went too far. His critique of Gibbon might not do much for his hopes of promotions.

[40] Watson, 1776, pp. 1–2 (facsimile, New York, 1977). See also Womersley, 1997b, pp. 44–105.

[41] Watson, 1776, pp. 4–6.

of the last generation. In suggesting that chapter 15 may be read in ways its author should have anticipated, he opens up the question of Gibbon's indirect language; and in nearly every case, he is defending against innuendo and imputation the beliefs and practices of Christians of the apostolic period and citing the canonical writings in their defence – which, as against Gibbon, they may or may not have needed. Watson's purpose, of course, is to vindicate and enlarge an account of apostolic Christianity as revealed truth and a system of revealed values; and in this enterprise he is able to make one major point, anticipated in some degree by Chelsum.

In reply to Gibbon's listing of the belief in immortality as one of the secondary causes, Watson asserts with a more than Warburtonian vigour that this is to underestimate what was afoot. It was not the belief in survival that rendered the gospel astonishing, he says, but the proclamation (chiefly by Paul) of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.[42] Not only was this beyond anything imagined by Homer or even Plato, but it transformed Christian morality into the expectation of eternal life in the presence of God. It was a commonplace to affirm that this promise was Jesus's means of perfecting natural morality, but Watson's use of it may explain his footnote in another context[43] directing the reader to Soame Jenyns's *View of the Internal Evidence of Christianity*, which must be considered further in this chapter. A life of eternal beatitude must be above and beyond, though necessarily supported by, the morality of natural society, and the transcendence of law by grace must have been revealed since human imagination could never have arrived at it. No cause mentioned by Gibbon, and none Watson is able to think of, accounts for the prevalence of such a vision,[44] and it is not clear that Gibbon intended such an account. His critics in following years were to suggest that he could not imagine the Christian vision himself.

Watson worked his way through the five causes and the sixteenth chapter, seeking to assert the history of revelation in times from pre-Christian to post-apostolic. He energetically defended the Israel of the Old Testament against Gibbon's Voltairean charges of misanthropy and recurrent apostasy, emphasising the many occasions on which Israel had borne witness to its mission.[45] The Jews down to the Captivity were the bearers of the Christian narrative; Watson felt no need to consider the period after the Return, or the catastrophe related by Josephus. For a Christian what mattered was the prophecies of Isaiah and their fulfilment in Christ, but neither Gibbon

[42] Ibid., pp. 43–4.
[43] Womersley, 1997b, p. 103 n. 28.
[44] Ibid., pp. 45–6.
[45] Ibid., pp. 19–30.

nor Watson has anything to say of this. If the central issue was whether the forces of revelation had carried over from apostolic to post-apostolic times, Gibbon had been indirect in his dealings with it, and Watson was obliged to be as indirect in his replies. He considers whether the earliest Christian communities practised a community of goods,[46] and emphasises that the early converts were respectable as well as outcast and marginal people.[47] He spends much time arguing that they did not entertain millennial expectations,[48] and arrestingly says that the apostolic prophecies – especially the Apocalypse – foretell the corruption of the Church and the rise of popery.[49] It is the first of many reminders that rational religion did not preclude the language of apocalyptic interpretation. He endorses Mosheim's and Gibbon's account of the rise of episcopacy, but says there is a good side to this which might have been given even though popery lay in its future.

In the matter of miracles, Watson argues at some length against versions of the Humean thesis, to which he rightly sees that Gibbon is inclined.[50] On the issue of persecution he contends against Gibbon's portrayal of polytheist tolerance, arguing that the Romans tolerated only such cults as were compatible with the gods of Rome and did not threaten civil order.[51] This is perhaps to miss Gibbon's point that there was nothing abnormal about persecution of Christians and what needed explanation was persecution by them. Watson was in no position to accept the Catholic argument that the noble army of martyrs enlarged the Church as a supernatural community, though he did accept martyrdom as witness to revealed truth. On the issue of heresy, it is to be observed that for both Gibbon in the fifteenth chapter and Watson replying to it, Beausobre's 'great history'[52] of gnosticism as philosophic dualism might never have been written. Gibbon had merely cited several gnostic criticisms of the God of the Jews, and Watson – affecting to regard Gibbon as endorsing these – remarks:

> I have not leisure to examine, whether the Gnostics of former ages really made all the objection you have mentioned. I take it for granted, upon your authority, that they did; but I am certain if they did, that the Gnostics of modern times have no reason to be puffed up with their knowledge, or to be had in admiration as men of subtile penetration or refined erudition; they are all miserable copiers of their brethren of antiquity; and neither Morgan, nor Tindal, nor Bolingbroke, nor Voltaire, have been able to produce scarce a single new objection . . . I must just

[46] Ibid., pp. 129–32. [47] Ibid., pp. 98–106. [48] Ibid., pp. 48–72. [49] Ibid., pp. 57–60.
[50] Ibid., pp. 86–96; Hume is not mentioned by name. [51] Ibid., pp. 173–84.
[52] Gibbon's description; p. 139 above.

mention it to my younger readers, that Leland[53] and others, in their replies to the modern Deists, have given very full, and, as many learned men apprehend, very satisfactory answers to every one of the objections, which you have derived from the Gnostic heresy.[54]

Watson's gnostics (and Gibbon's) would seem to be those of Paul rather than Irenaeus, and to make the ancient gnostics modern deists is surely to make both exponents of natural religion rather than the religion of nature. One must look well past the moderns Watson here mentions to catch sight of the Spinozistic monism that sprang (according to Beausobre) from the same taproot as magian dualism,[55] and the Christian impulse to write the gnostics out of the story is being carried on by Gibbon and his opponents. Watson was also perpetuating the alignment of Gibbon with the deists of preceding generations which, it is here argued, rested on a misreading of his position. At the end of his reply he does indeed exculpate Gibbon from deistic intentions;[56] but the 202 pages of his letters to him are followed by an epistle of 65 pages to a set of men who can have had no other intentions, and a further 26 written by another hand[57] in reply to Gibbon's treatment of Tacitus and Pliny. The reply to Gibbon remains deep in the Moderate Enlightenment, and the probably Socinian positions of Watson confront the enemies they had at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

(ii) evangelical responses: salisbury, jenyns, loftus

Watson concluded his criticism of the two chapters on a note consonant with his belief in private judgement, suggesting to Gibbon that they need not pursue the controversy but should leave the issue to the reading public.[58] Gibbon – though he had elsewhere described Watson's *Apology* as 'dull' and 'feeble'[59] – responded amiably and in accord with his policy of silence, suggesting to Watson that they might make acquaintance.[60] It is not clear if they ever met; Watson did not frequent London, or Gibbon Cambridge.[61]

[53] John Leland, 1691–1766; see ODNB, xxiii, pp. 301–33; Dublin Presbyterian and anti-deist.
[54] Watson, 1776, pp. 34–5; Womersley, 1997b, p. 53.
[55] There is mention (Watson, 1776, p. 23) of some 'who have made the very universe their god'.
[56] Ibid., pp. 198–200. [57] 'R. Wynne, Rector of St Alphage, London', ibid., p. 269.
[58] Ibid., pp. 200–1. [59] *Letters*, ii, pp. 120, 129. [60] Ibid., ii, p. 119 and n. 2.
[61] Watson was promoted to bishop of Llandaff by Lord Shelburne in 1782. Gibbon's remark that 'I dare not boast the making Dr Watson a bishop' (A, p. 317; Memoir E) may indicate merely that clerical patronage was beyond his sphere, or that the connection with Shelburne was better avoided. Watson enjoyed no further preference for the rest of his long life. He says (1818) that the circumstances of his elevation explain this.

A second edition of the *Apology* is mentioned in 1777[62] – a year of which Gibbon spent six months in Paris – but no further tracts aimed principally at the *Decline and Fall* appeared until Smyth Loftus's *Reply to the Reasonings of Mr Gibbon*, of which Gibbon did not know until March of 1778.[63] It was in that year that the controversy became vehement and complex, but in 1776 we have yet to deal with two treatises indirectly related to Gibbon – there were to be others – but important to the debate in which he was now engaged.

William Salisbury may have been seventy years old, and was certainly in virtual retirement, when he published his *History of the Establishment of Christianity, Compiled from Jewish and Heathen Authors Only* in 1776.[64] Gibbon did not acquire a copy, and it is one of the least noticed of the replies to the two chapters.[65] Of its author McCloy incontrovertibly remarks that 'he was not stupid. From 1728–58 he had been a fellow of St John's College',[66] and the book, published by subscription, was endorsed by the Master and no fewer than eighteen fellows of that College, besides many others.[67] Salisbury's strictures on Gibbon are appended to the body of the work, which is a translation from the French of an *Histoire de l'établissement du christianisme* by Jean-Baptiste Bullet of the Université de Besançon;[68] he presents it as filling a gap in Nathaniel Lardner's massive study of the written evidence for the credibility of the Gospels.[69] It is clear that the context and intentions of Bullet's Catholic treatise cannot have been identical with those of Salisbury's translation, and that the latter were not confined to the need to answer Gibbon. As we read Salisbury's text, however, we discover much about the context in which the controversy over the two chapters went on, though this cannot have been intended by Bullet.

Bullet, it seems, wrote in reply to a request or demand from a *philosophe* journal[70] for testimony to the Christian message from non-Christian sources; it was to supply these that Lardner had devoted his researches. Bullet's (and Salisbury's) volume, however, is more than the collection of

[62] McCloy, [1933], p. 374; not noticed by Craddock, 1987. McCloy [1933], p. 94, for further editions.

[63] *Letters*, II, p. 108.

[64] Salisbury, 1776, p. xx. He lacks an entry in either DNB or ODNB. See *Admissions to the College of St John the Evangelist* (Cambridge, 1882), p. 30. Thanks to Naomi Herbert of the Library, St John's College, for supplying these references.

[65] McCloy, [1933], pp. 104–7; Aston, 1997, p. 258n; Womersley, 2002, p. 30.

[66] McCloy, [1933], p. 105n.

[67] Salisbury, 1776, pp. iii–xvi.

[68] Bullet, 1764; for him see *Biographie universelle ancienne et moderne* (Paris, 1854), VI, pp. 134–5; *Dictionaire des lettres françaises* (Paris, 1960), I, p. 238. He had died in 1775.

[69] Salisbury, 1776, pp. xvii–xix; Lardner, 1764–7 (*Library*, pp. 171–2).

[70] Salisbury, 1776, p. xxv; 'the Author's Preface', referring to 'Pensées Philosophiques, n. 46'.

Jewish and pagan texts its title leads us to expect. It is rather an impassioned statement of the nature of revelation, designed to show that the veracity of non-Christian statements about it is to be found in their inability to comprehend it. The reader is introduced to the inextricability of revelation and faith. The text begins with the 'History'.

> In the reign of Tiberius, a man called Jesus, by nation a Jew, born of a poor woman, supposed to be the son of a Carpenter, and himself of the same occupation, of a mean figure and low stature, gathered together in Judea a company of fishermen, illiterate, unpolished, ignorant persons, and infamous, according to the account of the Heathens, for their disorderly lives. He gave himself out for the Messiah promised to the Jews, for the Christ, the Messenger of Heaven, the Son of God. He taught a Doctrine so sublime, that Reason could not comprehend it; and a Morality so pure, that his enemies have been forced to admire its perfection, or constrained to censure it as impracticable[.][71]

After his 'ignominious death upon the cross' and the mysterious disappearance of his body, this company of illiterates – it is assumed that all the Apostles were Galilean fishermen and the name of Paul is nowhere mentioned[72] – set about preaching his life, resurrection and doctrine. They are persecuted, first by Jews and afterwards by Romans, but their doctrine spreads to an 'infinite' (but unestimated) number of persons. The fury of persecution and the testimony of martyrs is recounted at length, including as always the narrative of Tacitus and the letters of Pliny, but there is further emphasis on the enmity of philosophers and their failure to launch a mass movement.[73] It is also conceded that heresies arose from the earliest years, and that this was in some ways a more dangerous form of persecution, which God has suffered to persist until the present[74] (Salisbury does not comment on what Bullet may have meant by this).

The narrative of persecution, which Christianity survives and overcomes by its inherent divine energies, is carried past the reign of Constantine, whose protection is very slightly mentioned,[75] to the death of Julian, 'Apostate and persecutor', at which

> the Idolatrous World became Christian. The whole Universe changes its God, its worship, laws, maxims, rules, opinions, sentiments, inclinations, manners, prejudices, customs, practices. An astonishing revolution! scarce to be credited, if one had not seen it brought about. We search with diligence into the causes of those slight alterations, which States undergo, in admitting other Sovereigns, or

[71] Ibid., pp. 1–2. The passage is studded with references, so far numbering ten, to the non-Christian texts supporting each statement.
[72] Cf. Mosheim, above, p. 187. [73] Salisbury, 1776, pp. 7–8, 31–2, 35–41, 59–63, 76–7, 82–7, 97–8.
[74] Ibid., p. 25. [75] Ibid., p. 75.

new national laws. With what eagerness then ought we to investigate the cause of the most interesting and most prodigious change that ever happened? To form a just idea and to discover the springs of it, let us in imagination go back to the time of the first publication of the Gospel, and let us consider the nature of the understanding, the extent of it, the time fixed upon for it, the authors chosen, the means made use of, the obstacles to be surmounted, and the success to be expected.[76]

These sentences occur as Salisbury reaches the end of Bullet's 'History' and begins translating the second section of his work, the 'Discourse'. Narrative is giving place to reflection, and neither author means us to understand that this revolution occurred instantaneously at the death of Julian. It took 300 years, and its history is about to be reviewed: the history of a cultural revolution, incidental – in the last analysis – to the single divine act, the revelation of the incarnate Word, that has produced it. Salisbury and Bullet are offering, for the first time in the Gibbon controversy, a full account of the 'primary cause' which Gibbon had reduced to a single sentence, and was being accused of neglecting, denying and seeking to replace.

This account proceeds by a systematic opposition of Christian values, based on a faith in another world and life, to the values of life in this world expressed in the culture of polytheism, here defined as idolatry.

This religion seems made for man; it is suited to his palate, favours his inclinations, and flatters his propensities. [All peoples have some idea of a God, but] man, whose thoughts are not easily disengaged from matter, was far from representing to himself this divine nature as a pure, spiritual and Infinite Being: such an idea would have discomposed his imagination, and disgusted his senses.

There is no mention of ancient philosophy; we are concerned with the cultic religions.

He therefore formed to himself a corporeal divinity; he multiplied it, and placed Gods in every part of the Universe. There were deities appropriated to the sea, to rivers, to mountains, to forests. Every nation, every city, every family, had its particular Gods assigned to it.[77]

This is Gibbon's religion of civil society, and at the same time a religion of the senses conducive to idolatry and the debaucheries usually associated with it. It is not Augustine's *libido dominandi*, since conquering virtue has disappeared; nor is it a consequence of that disappearance, as Robertson had suggested in a sermon[78] that left Christ's mission close to being a providential remedy for the ills of history. It is more a consequence of the

[76] Ibid., pp. 99–100. [77] Ibid., pp. 100–1. [78] Above, pp. 174–6.

Fall; the Gentile need of Christ is universal, that of the Jews peculiar to them.[79] But polytheism is as much a religion of society as of the senses; it

> was supported by every thing that could give authority to a national worship. They had sucked it in with their mother's milk: they regarded it as the most precious inheritance of their fathers; the nations thought that their happiness was connected with it; they made it the ground-work of their Republicks and States. It was so dear to them, that they fought in its defence with more ardour than for their own lives.[80]

The patriot is a witness to this world's values, the martyr to those of another. The religion of paganism enjoys

> the universal consent of mankind. Those wise Legislators, whose Laws to this day we still follow; Those great Philosophers, whose Works we admire; Those Orators, whose eloquence inchants; Those Historians, who serve us for models; so many happy Geniuses, so many men of parts, as Rome and Greece have produced, come to do homage to the Gods, and joined with the populace in singing their praises[81]

with the secular result that philosophy became the accomplice of idolatry. It was the religion of civility and politeness, as both Warburton and Gibbon had seen, that Christianity set out to overthrow, and the account we are being given is the mirror-image of Gibbon's. The Apostles act as the enemies of eloquence, and very nearly of speech; the hybridity of their language recurs:

> they speak like the lowest of the populace: their Greek is not pure: the turn of their phrases is often Hebraical and barbarous; consequently, in the judgment of Greeks and Romans, their discourses are irregular and slovenly; their style is rugged, and thick-set with parentheses; a confusion prevails in it, which gives pain, and requires the strongest attention. Language, which fatigues the mind to make itself understood, is not fitted to gain the heart.
>
> ARGUMENT
>
> The Philosophers have procured to themselves some Disciples by the force of reasoning. The Apostles take a different road: they give no other proofs of the truth of the doctrines they preach than that of their Mission.[82]

It is the Apostles, not the Fathers after them, who employ 'the corrupt dialect of the Hellenist Jews' to carry conviction of the news they bring, and the defects of their language are not the reason why this defies rational

[79] The Jewish refusal of Christ is a consequence of pride (Salisbury, 1776, p. 109); Bullet and Salisbury are as usual unclear about Second Temple history.
[80] Ibid., p. 105. [81] Ibid., p. 106. [82] Ibid., pp. 123–4.

enquiry. Once reason has assented to faith, it may find nothing in what it believes contrary to what it otherwise affirms, but we are a long way from the Enlightened Christian's desire to be assured of this before giving the assent. It was here, perhaps, in Gibbon's mind, that the irony of Pascal[83] encountered the irony of Hume. For Bullet and Salisbury, this was the point at which the primary cause for the spread of Christianity had to be the divine energy that revealed a doctrine at which the sociable intellect could never have arrived. It might have been better for Gibbon had he firmly stated that by the time of Constantine it was widely believed that such a revelation had occurred, and had he gone on to elaborate the ways in which this belief supplied the Christians with invincible zeal. Instead of stating it with detachment, he had defined it minimally and spoken of it with irony if at all, thus leaving unclear how far he wished to state disbelief in it and how far his secondary causes were intended to replace it or explain it away – as in the nature of the argument they were incapable of doing. He had redescribed faith as enthusiasm, but had addressed the problem of the former only indirectly; and this, paradoxically, is why he was suspected of a design to destroy it altogether.

Bullet and Salisbury proceeded, in many eloquent pages,[84] to develop the argument that since the Christian message was other-worldly it was contrary to the instincts and reason of worldly man, so that it could never have been invented by human agency and must have possessed the energy of revelation which alone could account for its triumph. The argument runs contrary to everything which has ever been meant by the term 'Enlightenment', but Salisbury's text, whatever its origins and intentions, does not invoke the image of deism or any other species of disbelief as its contemporary enemy. Philosophy figures only in its ancient form, as the accomplice of the polytheism it disbelieved but was unable to challenge.[85] As for the criticisms of Gibbon which Salisbury appended to his translation, two of them are concerned with the failure of ancient writers to mention the darkness at the Passion and the extent of persecution under Domitian.[86] Only the last involves any central issue; Salisbury rejects Gibbon's suggestion that the polytheism of the masses was eroded by the philosophic scepticism of the Roman elites, arguing that the vulgar are impervious to philosophy and the latter were obliged to uphold cultic religion.[87] The primary cause, as he and Bullet had stated it, was in its turn impervious to the secondary,

[83] A, p. 143. [84] Salisbury, 1776, pp. 136–9, 140–4, 155–62. [85] Ibid., pp. 173–7.
[86] Ibid., pp. 234–41, 258–9. A third (pp. 267–9) has to do with the community of goods ascribed to the early Christians.
[87] Ibid., pp. 288–90.

and it was a question how far Gibbon had meant to mobilise the latter against it.

Soame Jenyns, born in 1704, was a near-contemporary of Salisbury, and may have known him through their common membership in St John's College; he later knew Gibbon as a colleague on the Board of Trade. A Cambridgeshire country gentleman, he was a somewhat eccentric man of letters, given to entering controversies in terms so paradoxical as to arouse opposition where he had offered support.[88] Nearly twenty years earlier, his *Free Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil* had brought down the fury of Samuel Johnson,[89] and the case is not much otherwise with the *View of the Internal Evidence of the Christian Religion* which he published in 1776. Though not intended as a contribution to the Gibbon controversy, this work became involved in it. Richard Watson mentioned it, as did others;[90] Gibbon possessed a copy,[91] of which he says nothing; and the replies it provoked in one case extended into observations on the two chapters.[92] It significantly if challengingly enlarges the case, made by Bullet and Salisbury, for Christian doctrine as a revelation which could not have been constructed by human minds in history.

Jenyns's choice of a title may be, and probably was, read as bearing upon Gibbon's inadequate concession of 'the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself' as one half of the primary cause of the spread of Christianity. Gibbon had not stated what 'evidence' he deemed 'convincing', and his intentions were suspect; but he was within orthodoxy in intimating that the doctrine revealed itself to be the word of God through its utter incompatibility with the established beliefs of ancient human society. Whatever he thought or hinted about its origins, Gibbon had affirmed that incompatibility in his own way. Jenyns, not addressing Gibbon, presents the same argument as Salisbury. Christianity was

> a system of religion entirely new, both with regard to the system, and the doctrines; not only infinitely superior to, but totally unlike, every thing which had ever before entered into the mind of man . . . the object of this religion is entirely new and is this, to prepare us by a state of probation for the kingdom of heaven. This is everywhere professed by Christ and his Apostles to be the chief end of the Christian's life; the crown for which he is to contend, the goal to which he is to run, the harvest which is to pay him for all his labours. Yet, previous to their preaching, no such prize was ever hung out to mankind, nor any means prescribed for the attainment of it.[93]

[88] Rampkey, 1984 and 2004. Jenyns's collected works were published as Jenyns, 1794. They include much unremarkable verse, containing one immortal couplet (1794, I, p. 39) published by Rampkey, 1984, p. 86, and 2004, p. 27.
[89] Rampkey, 1984, pp. 31–5, 134–43. [90] Above, p. 322 (Watson); below, p. 334 (Loftus).
[91] *Library*, p. 160. [92] Below, p. 348 (Maclaine). [93] Jenyns, 1794, II, pp. 224–5.

Jenyns will not be content with any argument that Christ came to perfect human morality by the promise of a hereafter; for him, to perfect means to transcend. All previous systems of morals, such as those of the ancient legislators – even when including rewards and punishments after death – were

> only intended to give a sanction to their laws, and to enforce the practice of virtue for the benefit of mankind in the present life.[94]

Warburton's voice is audible, and we recall Gibbon's 'worldly philosophers, who, in the conduct of this transitory life, consult only the feelings of nature and the interest of society'.[95] It is precisely this which Jenyns's Christians condemn as insufficient.

> In all former religions the good of the present life was the first object; in the Christian it is but the second; in those, men were incited to pursue that good by the hopes of a future reward; in this, the practice of virtue is enjoined in order to qualify them for that reward.[96]

The voice is now Augustine's; Christianity is about the next world, rather than about this, and the rejection of the primacy of human society is what renders it new in history and superior to historical explanation. Jenyns goes on to say that while human reason could never have arrived at this vision, it will be found consonant with reason once it has been reached;[97] but he has clearly laid down a challenge to everything which we mean by the term Enlightenment, even when this was expressed in terms intended as consonant with Christianity. He sees this religion as proclaiming the absolute primacy of the supernatural virtues over the natural; and because this is unheard of in secular history, its proclamation must declare a moment at which sacred history assumes primacy over secular: a moment of revelation.

Jenyns was not concerned with the problem, shared by Gibbon and his critics, of finding causes for the spread of Christianity and its persecution, but he would have no difficulty in locating the conquering zeal of the Christians in their pursuit of another life and their rejection of the values of this one. He is on ground shared by both Gibbon and Robertson when he arrestingly specifies the values Christians did and must reject as including 'valour, patriotism and friendship';[98] two at least of them (the third needs fuller explication) the values of ancient society from which Romans had begun to fall away. Jenyns was to have critics who found this alarmingly drastic and too close to monasticism; and he was not far distant

[94] Ibid., pp. 225–6. [95] Above, p. 270. [96] Jenyns, 1794, II, pp. 224–6.
[97] Ibid., p. 227. [98] Ibid., pp. 239–44.

from Gibbon's diagnosis of a Christian rejection of society leading to enthusiasm. Like the equally Augustinian Bullet – it is pleasant to imagine a conversation in the Combination Room between Jenyns and Salisbury – he found proof that Christianity must have been revealed by God in its radical incompatibility with the values of classical society; but here there opened up before him the tensions between ancient and modern, and with them the tensions between grace and law, faith and works, fideism and criticism. Jenyns indicated that he had once been an unbeliever and had found his way back to faith in revelation;[99] but because faith might acknowledge reason in the act of defying it, he was not afraid of declaring that the Old and New Testaments were not a revelation but the history of a revelation,[100] and here his critics began to ask whether he was a sceptic or an enthusiast.[101] Archibald Maclaine, the translator of Mosheim, was one of these.[102]

Gibbon may be imagined enjoying the ironies of this debate; but it is part of his strategy of silence that he nowhere explored as the problem the relations between the secondary and primary causes, and it becomes possible to ask whether in chapter 15 he had left that problem in a state to be explored seriously. Salisbury and indirectly Jenyns were adversaries who knew how to make the case for the primary causes as divine action, but were far from clear in what ways Gibbon was making a case against them. Their position was evangelical in the sense that they insisted that the message of Christ was self-affirming, Augustinian in the sense that they declared it directed to the attainment of the *civitas Dei*, not the *civitas terrena*. Neither so far is primarily aimed at making the case against Gibbon; Salisbury's translation of Bullet attacks him only in appendices, while Jenyns did not write about him and was drawn into the debate only through citations made by others. It was another matter with the third text to be considered here.

Smyth Loftus published his *Reply to the Reasonings of Mr Gibbon*[103] in Dublin early in 1778 and a copy reached Gibbon in March.[104] He dismissed it with a witticism, but Loftus is to be taken seriously. He was less a learned

[99] Ibid., pp. 300–1: 'he once, perhaps, believed as little as themselves'.

[100] Ibid., p. 271; the testimony of fallible men 'depends on the internal evidence of its own supernatural excellence'.

[101] Rampkey, 2004, pp. 26–7. John Wesley doubted whether Jenyns was 'a Christian, deist or atheist'. Jenyns prefaced the *View* with the text 'Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.'

[102] Below, pp. 348–9.

[103] Loftus, 1778. Womersley, 1997b, pp. 116–84; the text here used.

[104] *Letters*, II, p. 172. He calls Loftus 'a *mere* Irish parson', perhaps in order to tease Holroyd for his Irish background. Loftus, of Elizabethan English descent, was not 'mere Irish' as that term was then used.

controversialist than a deeply sincere Christian horrified by the unlimited malignity of the intentions he read into Gibbon's chapters. It is, he says, his 'firm belief' in a religion which commands that we love one another which

> hath induced me to attempt a defence of it against the attacks of the more ingenious than candid Mr Gibbon, who, in his History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, has endeavoured totally to destroy it; and to introduce I know not what, it is more than probable he himself knows not what, in the place of it,[105]

words which show how completely the supposed intentions of the two chapters could become those attributed to the *Decline and Fall* as a whole. Accusations of this kind continue throughout Loftus's *Reply*: Gibbon 'must totally condemn all adoration of God as a piece of superstition and folly';[106] he 'applies all his endeavours to extirpate this religion';[107] 'numberless passages in the History shew that the author of it intended it to destroy Christianity utterly';[108] 'the whole bent of his soul appears to be set against Christianity';[109] 'he no more believes the miracles of Christ and his disciples than those of the after-Christians';[110] the Christian faith must and will

> withstand, and without any the last injury to itself, the fiercest attacks that Mr Gibbon, with all his genius and learning, all his deep prejudices and eagerness, could make to destroy it.[111]

Loftus is not paranoid but, confronted with a sceptical tone about a gospel of which Gibbon says nothing directly, he has been unable to avoid maximising beyond all limits both Gibbon's scepticism and his intentions. There could be no better illustration of Hugh Blair's point that Gibbon's 'attacking religion' was bound to 'clog' his historical argument; innuendo led to interpretation out of control. Loftus saw Gibbon as continuing the deist offensive of a previous generation. He associates him with Voltaire, Tindal, Bolingbroke[112] and above all Middleton, exploring the relations between Gibbon's text and those of the latter to a point where he shows them to have been more than imaginary.[113] This is to make Gibbon an exponent of natural religion,[114] of which of course he had nothing to say; but when Loftus at one point declares

> I will not suppose my antagonist to be an atheist, but a theist and a believer of God and his attributes,[115]

[105] Womersley, 1997b, p. 116. [106] Ibid., p. 125. [107] Ibid., p. 129. [108] Ibid., p. 133.
[109] Ibid., p. 159. [110] Ibid., p. 161. [111] Ibid., p. 184.
[112] Voltaire, ibid., p. 152; Tindal, p. 133; Bolingbroke, pp. 129, 145.
[113] Middleton, ibid., pp. 150, 152–3, 158, 172–3, 183.
[114] Ibid., pp. 116, 122, 128, 133. [115] Ibid., p. 125.

the antagonist may not be Gibbon but a more conventional figure; Loftus's target is conventional deism throughout. Hume is not mentioned. Loftus is aware of Watson's *Apology*,[116] and cites Jenyns[117] as making the case for internal evidence. Here he comes into line with the argument for revelation as the primary cause for the spread of Christianity, and emphasises Christ's poverty and obscurity, and the illiteracy of the Apostles,[118] in language so close to Salisbury's that we must see it as their common possession. He emphasises less than his predecessors the supersession of polytheist religion, preferring to depict the Christian message as replacing the inadequacies of ancient philosophy,[119] which he supposes Gibbon to exalt above it. This process rests upon prophecy; in terms which Gibbon certainly thought unmeaning, he defends against Gibbon the religion of the Jews as containing the 'types and shadows' of the revelation to come with Christ.[120] (Even Hugh Blair, it is worth noticing, preached a sermon in 1777 in which Christ's words from the cross – 'it is finished' or 'consummatum est' – are seen as fulfilling the types and shadows, extending even to the four monarchies of Daniel and the stone cut without hands.[121] One must not be overhasty in supposing a triumph of rational Christianity, even among Edinburgh Moderates; Blair spoke from the pulpit of the High Kirk.)

For Loftus, 'the Son of God . . . is himself that efficient and final cause and sustainer of all things, become man'[122] and Christ 'is the lamb slain from the foundation of the world'.[123] He employs the word 'providence' in the plural, meaning less God's foreordering the affairs of the world – as it is impious to deny he does, since we do not yet know the end[124] – than his provisions for human happiness and salvation.[125] The greatest providence is Christianity itself,[126] with its assurance that 'Men are made for a future life; it is the great end of their being',[127] and the preaching of this doctrine is itself the greatest internal evidence for it as revelation. That Gibbon set this aside and did not pursue it is what assures Loftus of his disbelief, more than any argument he could bring against it; and of course he has brought none – hardly even a sneer[128] – and his impiety consists in his listing secondary causes without paying sufficient attention to a primary. To refute the secondary causes is almost beside the point, since to define them as secondary is to confess their inadequacy; but Loftus

[116] Ibid., pp. 116, 129, 133, 137, 148, 149, 171. [117] Ibid., pp. 130, 159.
[118] Ibid., pp. 130–1, 160. [119] Ibid., pp. 117–18, 123, 144, 146, 168–9, 176–9, 183.
[120] Ibid., pp. 136, 148. [121] Blair, 1807, I, Sermon V, pp. 123–30, 137.
[122] Womersley, 1997b, p. 120. [123] Ibid., p. 139. [124] Ibid., pp. 135, 143, 147.
[125] Ibid., pp. 120–1, 143–4. [126] Ibid., p. 121. [127] Ibid., p. 137.
[128] Ibid., p. 149; the first appearance of this key word in Gibbon criticism.

engages in this criticism in order to display Gibbon as a modern deist in love with ancient philosophy.[129] He is able, however, as were others, to make the telling point that Gibbon is better at explaining the Christian zeal to make converts than the readiness of the pagans to be converted.[130] A modern reader may suspect that Gibbon is more concerned to establish the character of Christianity in history than to explain the causes of its spread; but Loftus and those like him wish to explain the latter, as the conquering 'foolishness of the Word'. The difference is not one to be described by means of erudition, and this is why so much of the various replies to Gibbon remains wearisome to read. The effective replies are those which concerned themselves with the primary cause: the internal evidence, or self-evidence of revelation.

'And now I might conclude', says Loftus,

> but I think it first necessary to warn the Christian reader against being frightened from his religion, by the horrid picture which he will hereafter find to be drawn by Mr Gibbon, and justly too, in his history of the next and the two following centuries, when the furious dissentions, animosities, persecutions, and cruelty of the Christians against each other, and when the luxury, pride, ambition, turbulence, of their great and powerful clergy, will present a horrid scene to his view; – very dishonourable, indeed, to the actors themselves, but not really hurtful to their religion; for, both by its most positive precepts, and by the whole tenor of its doctrines, it is the farthest removed from, it is the most adverse to, this abominable destructive spirit.[131]

Anglo-British Protestant clergy, of whom were nearly all Gibbon's immediate critics, employed against Rome a rhetoric of priestcraft which deist and philosophical post-Christians took over with little change and directed against the clergy in general. Loftus, like others considered so far, endeavoured to deconstruct Gibbon's five secondary causes as intended to diminish or deny the primary Christian revelation; but like Chelsum, Watson and Salisbury, he has little or nothing to say against the last of them, Gibbon's Mosheim-based account of the rise of the clergy and their authority. To any Protestant, the history of the post-primitive Church must include a history of corruption and usurpation, and it was possible to see the origins of this process as pre-dating the rise of the papacy. There was a

[129] Loftus is not systematic in his dealings with the five causes; but the first and second are addressed on ibid., p. 146, the third on p. 149, the fourth on p. 153 and the fifth on p. 157. See further the summary on pp. 162–6. Note the argument that the Church was too much divided to have spread by its unity, and (p. 161) that the five causes can apply only to the post-apostolic period.

[130] E.g. ibid., pp. 168–9.

[131] Ibid., p. 184. He has earlier (pp. 170–1) made the common charge that deism will lead in the end to the triumph of Rome.

long-established rhetoric which traced it to the association with Constantine, and Loftus's language in the passage quoted could be read in that sense. What else would be Gibbon's subject in 'the next and the two following centuries', or volumes? Once again we are reminded that had Gibbon proceeded direct to the establishment of Christianity as a state religion, he could have written an ecclesiastical history contentious and controversial, but free from the taint of deism, scepticism and unbelief. He could have considered the history of the Church before Constantine with an eye solely to the growth of conditions relating to the consequences of establishment, as by the end of chapter 15 it is arguable that he was doing. His critics were all primarily concerned with his separation between the primary and the secondary causes, and what they believed was his intention of subverting the former. Blair had asked why he was doing this and what he thought he was doing, since it was irrelevant to the history Gibbon was engaged to write. Did he intend to reduce the belief in revelation to the operation of secondary causes? The modern reader must ask the same question. His critics in 1776 and after were assuming that he did, but had failed to do so, since the secondary causes did not address the claim that revelation had occurred, and Salisbury and Bullet in particular were seeking to display the operations of revelation as sacred history.

(iii) East Apthorp, historian manqué

Letters on the Prevalence of Christianity before its Civil Establishment, with Observations on a Late History of the Decline of the Roman Empire appeared in London in 1778. The author, East Apthorp, was a New Englander by birth, educated at the Boston Latin School and then in England at Jesus College, Cambridge. Instead of pursuing the usual career, he returned to Boston as a missionary, charged by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel with bringing episcopal light to darkest Massachusetts, but after a war of pamphlets with Jonathan Mayhew removed once more to England, and became vicar of Croydon under the patronage of Archbishops Secker and Cornwallis.[132] The work he there composed is in the form of a series of letters to William Backhouse, archdeacon of Canterbury, revised for publication and variously dated between 30 March 1776 – very soon after

[132] For his life see ODNB, II, pp. 309–11; McCloy [1993], pp. 107–10. See Clark, 1993, Section VI, ch. 2, for the Society's campaign to establish Anglican authority in the American colonies. Apthorp married a niece of Governor Hutchinson, but returned to England a year before the violence of 1765.

the publication of Gibbon's first volume – and 1 December 1777.[133] They indicate – there will appear reasons why Apthorp probably did not intend to write[134] – a history of quite another kind than the *Decline and Fall*: not necessarily the history he thinks Gibbon ought to have written, but certainly the history his readers need to know in order to correct Gibbon's work; a Protestant universal history, history of mankind and ecclesiastical history, in which the Christian revelation is not merely the central event but the source of all its meaning. Apthorp offers the outline of such a history, as leading to a further volume which in the event he did not write; but this is less a statement of his ambitions than his beliefs. It is enough to make his reply to Gibbon a work of another order than any so far considered.

He offers an '*amicable conference*' – the italics are perhaps intended to recall the *amica collatio* between Limborch and Orobio da Castro[135] – with 'the very learned historian of declining Rome',[136] whom he treats with great courtesy but thinks has made the worse appear the better cause. At an early point, however, he expresses dissatisfaction with the *Decline and Fall* in terms that may surprise the modern reader.

> I was disappointed in my expectations of instruction from this book, when I perceived that the author had adopted that entertaining but superficial manner of writing history, which was first introduced by the Abbé de Vertot;[137] whose history of the Revolutions in the government of the Roman republic is one of those agreeable and seducing models, which never fail of producing a multitude of imitations. There is, in this way of writing, merit enough to recommend it to such readers, and such writers, as propose to themselves no higher aim, than an elegant literary amusement; it piques their curiosity, while it gratifies their indolence.[138]

This is not how we estimate the *Decline and Fall*; but Gibbon was not afraid of saying that he 'wrote for his amusement'. Apthorp was in fact criticising the practice of writing history with the result that history emerged as something written by the historian. At another point, he says with emphasis that history can be studied only by reading the original sources; and while these are certainly histories written by historians, they are testimonies

[133] Apthorp, 1778, pp. 1 (Letter I, dated 1 December 1776), 13 (Letter II, dated 30 March 1776; Letter III is undated), p. 352 (at end of Letter IV but preceding notes and references), 1 December MDCCLXXVII. The coincidence of 1 December in the first and last dates is suspicious.

[134] Ibid., pp. xii–xiii (note reference to Watson). Below, p. 347.

[135] Mentioned by Gibbon, ch. 15, n. 15 (Womersley, 1994, I, p. 452). Apthorp would know of it from other sources, but the Gibbon reference may be the occasion of his mentioning it here.

[136] Apthorp, 1778, pp. xi–xii.

[137] Vertot, Renè Aubert (1655–1735), author of an *Histoire des révolutions arrivées dans le gouvernement de la république romaine* (1722). For Gibbon's use and criticism of him, not unlike Apthorp's, see Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1271.

[138] Apthorp, 1778, pp. 13–14.

by witnesses of sacred and secular actions. We read them for assurances of sacred and secular truths, not as a way of reinterpreting these truths to ourselves – Apthorp belongs to the world of the *ars historica* rather than the *ars critica* – and certainly not for the sake of literary pleasure. To substitute pleasure for edification is a step towards unbelief, and the alignment of Gibbon with Vertot is carried a step further when we read:

> Voltaire has given the brightest lustre and polish, both of style and selection, to this agreeable and seducing mode of composition. The manners and spirit of nations[139] from Charlemagne to the present times, are described in a moving picture, more animated than exact, more amusing than instructive; while not a single authority is alleged for the truth of facts, and the writer's own system is insensibly insinuated into the reader's judgement . . . [A quotation from Horace follows.]
>
> The prejudices of the accomplished author of the late history of the decline of the Roman Empire, are so obvious from the most cursory perusal of his work; as to lead both the friends and enemies of revealed religion to discern, that the ecclesiastical part of the imperial history was much more interesting to the writer, than the confused policy, the military despotism, and the rapid succession of its sanguinary tyrants.[140]

This is far, but not too far, from the charge that Gibbon wrote the history of the empire in order to discredit the Church; Apthorp is in fact saying that the *littérateur* is next to the *philosophe*, and that to write in order to give pleasure is more Epicurean than Christian. He reads history in search of assurance and authority, and its central fact is the revelation of God in Christ. This is under attack from deism, which Apthorp like others considers a phenomenon of the recent past. The only living exponents named as he wrote had died by the time he published.

> In England, the modern deism is the offspring of that luxury and impiety, which succeeded the Great Rebellion

of which, with its iconoclasm and antinomianism, Apthorp has next to nothing to say.

> The first onslaughts on revealed religion were rude and tumultuous, like those of peasants and barbarians. Libertinism began the attack; which was supported by the aid of Learning. Much erudition was employed, on both sides, in the conduct of this interesting controversy with an Herbert, a Blount, a Toland, a Woolston, a Collins. While the philosopher of Malmesbury attempted to reason Britons out of their faith and freedom; Shaftesbury employed the finer weapons of wit and ridicule. All in their turns have been disarmed of the power of doing

[139] Voltaire's title: *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (NCG, chs. 7–9).
[140] Apthorp, 1778, pp. 15–16.

mischief. It was reserved for the times we live in, to assault Christianity with the shining and specious arms of Eloquence. To the plebeian style of Chubb and Morgan, to the thorny erudition of Woolston and Collins, to the wit and ribaldry of Shaftesbury and Mandeville; has succeeded the purity and elegance of Voltaire, the cold correctness of Hume, and the impassioned eloquence of Rousseau.[141]

The paragraph concludes with Bolingbroke and Chesterfield as displaying the union of style with impiety.[142] Once again, there is no hint of the anti-Trinitarianism active in the 1770s, but Apthorp – aware as he is of the history he is living in – compares his times to those in which the first Christians encountered a philosophically polished paganism.[143]

Objections to revelation have been of late proposed obliquely, and where the unsuspecting reader would not think to find them.

This could mean Gibbon, but Apthorp does not name him.

Irreligion hath appeared in the flowery dress of fable and romance; and like another Circe, hath held forth her inchanted cup, to transform men into brutes. At this very time, we see the archimage of infidelity, presenting to a dissipated public, the dotages of a worn-out imagination, in every fantastic form that fiction can assume.[144]

This can only be the aged Voltaire, now in the last year of his life. At a much later point, Apthorp anticipates a well-known passage in Burke[145] by observing:

It is a prevailing idea, that an attempt to extirpate, if it were possible, the Christian Religion, hath been carried on in this century systematically and in concert by a series of writers and their numerous disciples . . . This impious enterprise, if it did not originate, has principally disclosed itself in France . . . To carry on this design, all the sciences have been pressed into the service of irreligion, in an enormous encylopedia, the work of the whole conclave.[146]

Here is the context in which Apthorp engages with Gibbon, but he does not repeat Loftus's indictment of him as a fanatical and committed deist. Part if not all of the explanation may be found in Apthorp's admiration of Bolingbroke and Gibbon for both their literary style and their capacity to relate secular history, even at the expense of the sacred. He praises Gibbon's erudition as well as his eloquence, and never says worse of him than that

[141] Ibid., p. 4. [142] Ibid., p. 5. [143] Ibid. [144] Ibid., p. 6.

[145] Burke, 1987, p. 97: 'the vast undertaking of the *Encyclopedia*, carried on by a society of these gentlemen . . . This literary cabal had some years ago formed something like a regular plan for the destruction of the Christian religion.'

[146] Apthorp, 1778, p. 185.

he has erred in the direction of deism by emphasising the former history and failing to narrate the latter. Apthorp set out to remedy this imbalance by narrating a sacred and universal history; but a necessary first step is to examine modern historiography in the context of a modern history predominantly secular.

This is performed in the second Letter, which is principally concerned with civil history defined as the history of nations. It necessarily begins with Moses and the Pentateuch,[147] since the history of the world must begin with its creation; but after God's covenant with Israel, Gentile history is Greek and Roman; Apthorp does not pursue a history of the peoples dispersing from Ararat or Shinar. He is in search of history as far as possible universal, so that Diodorus Siculus ranks above Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon,[148] and Dio Cassius above Tacitus;[149] so far this is not a history of *libertas et imperium*. Polybius, however, is studied at length, since his theme of the transformation of the Mediterranean world prefigures the modern history of Europe, and the authors of the *Historia Augusta* receive attention precisely because their bad Latin tells us something about the world they were living in;[150] Apthorp's conventional scheme does not preclude some early modern insights. The history of the Church, which begins with Eusebius, is at this point more that of an association than that of the revelation it conveys, and Apthorp's survey moves fairly rapidly toward the end of the empire and the middle ages. Here we encounter the 'Christian millennium' of the 'Enlightened narrative'; the narrative here is Protestant but similar. The era is that of two great anti-Christian edifices, the papacy and the caliphate;[151] the latter is once referred to as 'Mahometan deism',[152] but the former is portrayed, as firmly as Gibbon was ever to do, as the alliance between barbarism and a false religion. The invading tribes find the bishopric of Rome firmly established, and it has no difficulty in bringing them into intellectual subjugation.[153]

Apthorp thinks the history of these centuries too little studied, and believes, as he did with the *Historia Augusta*, that the barbarism of medieval historians is itself a source of information.[154] There is the further reason, Protestant but not Enlightened, that he believes the rise and fall of the

[147] Ibid., pp. 21–2, 24–5. [148] Ibid., pp. 25–8.
[149] Ibid., pp. 33–4. Tacitus is never a central figure. See however the praise of Polybius, pp. 29–33.
[150] Ibid., p. 50.
[151] Ibid., pp. 37, 40–1, 167 ('the dark millennium of Popery and Mohammedanism').
[152] Ibid., p. 42.
[153] Ibid., pp. 40–1; 'To record and to adorn a recital of those ages, when barbarism and superstition overran the world, would require an impartial protestant pen.' Ibid., pp. 43–4.
[154] Ibid., p. 44.

papacy to have been prophesied, and here we begin to encounter his understanding of sacred history. At the outset of his narrative the Church appears as the Danielic stone not cut with hands, falling in turn on Pharaonic Egypt, post-Davidic Israel, the Second Temple and the Roman empire, to destroy them when their actions become impious.[155] We find ourselves in the world of Otto of Freising,[156] and the symbols of the Apocalypse begin to predict events close to Apthorp's own time.[157] It is necessary to understand that thinking of this kind was not eccentric in late eighteenth-century England, and forms part of the history of revelation Apthorp was trying to write.

Modern ecclesiastical history begins with the Reformation. William Robertson's *Charles V*, which Apthorp greatly admires for its journey through the medieval to the modern, covers the Lutheran period but as we know[158] has little to say about the seventeenth century. There are only national histories of the Wars of Religion and their aftermath, and for England even these are thin on the ground; Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion* is nowhere mentioned. Apthorp may not have wished to deal with these contentious matters, and there is the difficulty that their history has been written by Hume, whom he considers an enemy to both liberty and religion.[159] As his narrative moves out of the seventeenth century into the eighteenth, he has the growth of deism before him as a challenge, and by far his best guide to the history of Europe is none other than Bolingbroke, whose account of the general crisis of the year 1700 shows the Spanish Succession transforming the state system of Europe as that of the Mediterranean had been transformed for Polybius.[160] It was intelligible to Apthorp, however, that elegant history might accompany deism even as its instrument; and for a historian of ecclesiastical affairs interacting with civil he was able to rely on Gilbert Burnet, 'the Eusebius of the English Church',[161] whose *History of the Reformation* covered the establishment of English Protestantism as his *History of his Own Time* did the Revolution settlement and the English role in the new European order.[162] Apthorp needed to see the late seventeenth-century Church of England[163] as achieving the reasonably successful Christianity of his own time, triumphant over the deism of the intervening generation. That Gibbon had anything to do with a crisis in the late 1770s and after is not foreseen in his text.

[155] Ibid., pp. vii–viii. [156] Not mentioned by Apthorp; but see FDF, pp. 105, 113.
[157] Apthorp, 1778, pp. 35–8. [158] NCG, pp. 296–7.
[159] Apthorp, 1778, pp. 48, 74. The English historians mentioned with Hume on the latter page seem to be Catharine Macaulay and Bolingbroke.
[160] Ibid., pp. 55–61. [161] Ibid., p. 54. [162] Ibid., pp. 71–3. [163] Ibid., pp. 172–3.

Letter II has surveyed civil and ecclesiastical history from ancient to modern, but we are not to forget that their setting is in history both sacred and universal. It is followed by some eighty pages of what we should term bibliography, presenting what the author quite rightly terms a 'contracted plan'[164] of the reading necessary to his enormous subject. He surveys and summarises a body of learning which is that of the clerical culture of his generation, and would not have been unfamiliar to Gibbon despite its outlook and authorship. Apthorp is using it, however, to build up both a history and a view of history which Gibbon would not have written and he thought a necessary reply to the history Gibbon had written. Near to its centre he situated an 'Analysis of the Revelations of St John, being an Introduction and outline of Ecclesiastical History', in which the seven seals, trumpets, visions and phials of the Apocalypse successively introduce us to seven periods of that history, past and yet to come.[165] We are obliged to understand a view of history in which Apthorp was not monomaniac or even eccentric, and prophecy a necessary part of the discipline regularly practised and prepared to defend itself in the act of replying to Gibbon.

Letter III reverts to Mosaic antiquity, beginning with the Creation, and the modern reader needs to remember, not only that one is dealing with intelligent people for whom this narrative was not nonsense, but that they found it easier to doubt than to replace it. There was not yet either the archaeology or the geology out of which to construct an alternative history of humanity. Apthorp's concern was with revelation, to which creation was a necessary precondition; but its immediate precondition was idolatry – termed by others superstition – and he defines this as a post-diluvian phenomenon, and does not address the question of creation *ex nihilo*. The sins of antediluvian peoples were moral, not doctrinal; they were all natural theists,[166] and this mindset persisted to some degree even after Babel and Shinar, when idolatry began to corrupt it. Apthorp gives several accounts of how this happened. One is near-philosophical: shepherd peoples, living among vast spaces of earth and sky, tended to worship both, in ways that led away from theism towards pantheism.[167] In other cases, ancestor-worship and hero-worship helped produce the confusion between the god and his image essential to idolatry, and castes of priests appeared[168] alongside the purely civic worship practised in the city states. Natural theism persisted, and there were ancient lawgivers like

[164] Ibid., p. 80. [165] Ibid., pp. 110–16.
[166] Ibid., pp. 161, 253–4, 256 ('idolatry was successive to theism'), 259. [167] Ibid., pp. 257–8.
[168] Ibid., pp. 265–8 (the Druids), 296–9 (Greek and Roman).

Numa Pompilius who taught a worship purer than idolatry. Apthorp here follows for several pages Louis de Beaufort's account of how Etruscan superstition was introduced in Tarquinian Rome and persisted as the civic religion of the republic.[169] A more crucial distinction appears after God's covenant with Israel, when the theism of the Gentiles may degenerate into deism, or worse.

The system he is putting forward is closer to Warburton's than to Hume's. Theism precedes polytheism, the religion of sociability, which only in large part succeeds in corrupting its predecessor. While the covenant with Israel keeps a pure theism alive,[170] philosophy now arises, among the Greeks and in Persia and China,[171] as a means of empowering reason to arrive at a concept of God not otherwise revealed. This is a providence,[172] not as some (unmentioned by Apthorp) had thought a covenant between God and the Greeks, but intended as central to a Christian account of Gentile religion in the age between the Flood and the Incarnation, to be set against Gibbon's minimal if infidel account of the pagan culture, polytheist and philosophical, on which Christianity made its revolutionary impact. Gibbon had not supplied a history of the pre-Christian intellect; Apthorp was engaged in supplying one, in which divine revelation should appear the moving force. Prophecy and philosophy were its movers until the coming of Christ; only then was it revealed that the soul was immortal and assured of resurrection, and (as a consequence) the earth a creation with a beginning and an end.[173] Ancient philosophy, lacking this information, was compelled to arrive at the dead end of pantheism. Apthorp devotes many pages to a reading in this sense of Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, and his plan for a deification of his daughter Tullia; had he lived in papal Rome, he would have had her beatified and sanctified instead.[174] But he believed that her soul had returned to Warburton's τό ἕν; this, or a more radical materialism, Epicurean or Spinozist, was the necessary philosophical outcome of the religion of sociability.

[169] Ibid., pp. 273–81; FDF, pp. 361–71.

[170] Apthorp, 1778, pp. 162–3 ('a divine intercourse with the race of Shem . . . amidst the idolatrous intercommunity, which was cherished as a social principle among all the idolatrous nations'). Note the Warburtonian terminology.

[171] Ibid., pp. 163–5.

[172] Ibid., p. 164 ('a providential expedient . . . to demonstrate the inefficacy of reason . . . and to give the utmost splendor to the gospel-revelation').

[173] Beausobre would have strengthened Apthorp's argument at this point. He receives only a bibliographical reference (ibid., p. 149).

[174] Ibid., pp. 219–33 (introduced, pp. 218–19, by a quotation from Gibbon on the inadequacy of ancient concepts of God), 283–8, 311–14 ('canonized by a consistory of ecclesiastics').

Apthorp knew that *De Natura Deorum* was a key text for Gibbon,[175] though he may not have known of the latter's Lucretian reading of Virgil[176] or noticed his observation that 'the rich and polite Italians had universally adopted the philosophy of Epicurus'.[177] What he was doing in the wake of Warburton was supplying a fuller history of paganism than Gibbon had afforded, leading to the proposition that its supersession was unintelligible without a revelation. Gibbon had not stated this, and was open to the charge that he did not believe it; but he had not refuted it, and it was becoming increasingly clear that the five secondary causes neither substituted themselves for it nor explained the rise of belief in it. Apthorp's history proceeds in the following terms. During the century of the republic's disintegration, the uneasy alliance of pantheism and polytheism was undermined by the Epicurean materialism cynically adopted by the leaders of the warring factions, and by the massive destruction of Italian and Greek temples carried out in the civil wars.[178] Augustus, however, setting out to restore the state in his own manner, had re-established the worship of the gods as a civil religion,[179] and the self-destructive materialism of Epicurus had been replaced by Stoicism followed by neo-Platonism.[180] It was therefore a well-established 'intercommunity' – Apthorp uses Warburton's word[181] – of philosophy and polytheism that responded to the Christian onslaught with a persecution driven by its deep conviction that it was the religion of society. Gibbon, we must read Apthorp as asserting, had not been wrong in seeing that the revelation of another world was incompatible with ancient religion, the self-worship of society.[182] What he had failed to acknowledge was that this was why it must have been a revelation, and therefore had been revealed.

The criticism of Gibbon has begun before this complex narrative is reached. It originates with some passages from chapters 1 and 2 of the *Decline and Fall*

[175] Ibid., p. 219. [176] *Critical Observations on the Sixth Book of the Aeneid* (1770); EE, pp. 131–62.
[177] Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 85–6. [178] Apthorp, 1778, pp. 320–32.
[179] Ibid., pp. 332–49. [180] Ibid., pp. 327–8.
[181] Ibid., p. 163. See also p. 350: 'it was not an old and worn out establishment, which the christian religion had to contend with'.
[182] Ibid., pp. 204 ('The reason of this unsocial conduct results from the very nature of religious truth'), 212 ('The pagan toleration did not consist in liberty of conscience, but in sociability of worship . . . The Christians could not keep this temperament; they were expressly commanded, every where to erect the religion of JESUS on the remains of paganism . . . the heathen toleration, so mild and indulgent to all who would not molest the religion of the state, was converted into the most sanguinary of persecutions'), 253–4 ('that *social principle* . . . that philosophic *pantheism* . . . the civil *establishment* of paganism').

wherein the Author insinuates that aversion from Christianity, which is more apparent in the sequel of his work.[183]

This is perhaps the strongest language Apthorp uses against Gibbon. The passage first attacked is that in which Gibbon had spoken of Palestine as a small and poor province;[184] Apthorp probably thought this borrowed from Voltaire,[185] as part of the latter's account of the ancient Jews as a mean and inconsiderable people – Gibbon had concurred[186] – unworthy of the revelation they claimed to have received.[187] He was thinking of Gibbon as a participant in the deist offensive. After five pages on this subject, he quoted chapter 1 on 'the perpetual servitude of Egypt'[188] and said the wonder was that Gibbon had failed to admit that this was, at every moment in its history, foretold 'with the precision of historians'.[189] Here we reach the core of Apthorp's argument. The rise of Christianity is a miraculous event, affirmed and accomplished by supernatural means, and this is demonstrated by its victory over the universal opposition of the Roman people and their magistrates, of which

there were two occasional causes . . . the confounding the Christian religion with Judaism: and the *unsocial* temper of both these divine revelations, which would admit of no fellowship, no communion, with the pagan establishment.[190]

Here Apthorp was falling in line with Warburton, Bullet, Salisbury, Jenyns and Loftus, all of whom had said that the persecution and the triumph of Christianity were alike due to its proclamation of supernatural values both perfecting and abolishing those of civil society, of which polytheism was the sacralisation. Gibbon had entirely concurred with this reading, but had failed to state – and therefore, they thought, had denied – that the supernatural values were of supernatural origin and their proclamation and acceptance a supernatural act. With his account of how the repudiation of the social had generated a conquering zeal his critics saw no need to quarrel; but they thought it methodologically impossible that the repudiation of society could have social or secular origins, and were torn between refutation of such arguments as they could find in his text that this had happened, and frustration at his refusal to face the question directly.

[183] Ibid., p. 194. [184] Ibid.
[185] 'We know, my friend, from whose quiver this shaft is borrowed'; ibid. See, however, the mention of 'Toland and his followers' on the opposite page.
[186] DF, 1, ch. 15; Womersley, 1994, 1, p. 447. [187] NCG, pp. 104–6.
[188] Apthorp, 1778, p. 199. [189] Ibid.
[190] Ibid., pp. 200–1; appended to a quotation from Gibbon on ancient toleration.

Gibbon was paying a heavy price for the language and structure of the two chapters, and for his refusal to admit that this problem existed.

The history of Roman religion and the analysis of Cicero's theology occur after the passages just quoted and take up the remainder of Apthorp's Letter III and the bulk of Letter IV. They are part of his demonstration that the victory of the sacred over the social could only have come about by supernatural means. What this may imply for the present and future of the history Apthorp says his readers are living in emerges, if at all – perhaps only by way of illustration – near the end of the work, when he considers the question of the Christianisation of China. Here are pagans more entrenched in a sociable religion than even the subjects of the Roman empire; as Christians and *philosophes* combine to tell us, they worship only their own social customs, supported less by polytheist imagination than by Confucian deism (Ricci and Voltaire) and neo-Confucian Spinozism (Beausobre and Freret).[191] The Jesuit attempt to Christianise the Chinese rituals is condemned – it would be easy to see it as paralleling the corrupt Christian adoption of pagan ceremonies[192] – and the conclusion reached is that even the Christian message cannot triumph without miraculous action.[193] Here Apthorp is on dangerous ground. Is not the 'internal evidence' of the Word – the 'foolishness of the word' spoken of by Paul – of itself supernatural? Must there be miracles performed by the Peking missionaries; a second Pentecost unleashing on China the energies of a second apostolate? Does Apthorp hope to find this foretold by the sevenfold wonders of the Apocalypse? His system is pre-millennial; during the thousand years in which Satan is to be bound marvellous events may occur;[194] but he does not seem to follow up what he may have intimated in the matter of China.

By the end of the *Letters on the Prevalence of Christianity*, Apthorp has taken us deeper into clerical culture than any previous critic of Gibbon, and furnished a very detailed outline of the Protestant universal history which they all thought Gibbon should have written, and which alone could remedy the deficiencies – or the hostile intentions – of chapters 15 and 16. He concludes the work by saying:

[191] Above, pp. 152–3 (Beausobre) and EEG, pp. 162–8 (Freret); NCG, pp. 98–100, 104–7 (Ricci and Voltaire); BSE, pp. 101–6, 123–32 (de Guignes). See further Apthorp, 1778, pp. 388–91.

[192] Above, pp. 227–8 (Middleton), 321 (Chelsum).

[193] Apthorp, 1778, pp. 187, 351, 353–4. On the Chinese failure, pp. 354–5, 391 ('to complete my argument, that even christianity cannot prevail by human power or wisdom'). This concludes Apthorp's treatise.

[194] Ibid., p. 116.

It would require a work of equal extent, and composed with equal advantages of leisure and literature, to examine all parts of this author's system, on the subject of polytheism and christianity. But I will detain you no longer at present, on a topic which I intend to pursue from the age of Augustus to that of Theodosius the Great: the victory of christianity over gentilism, in that long and arduous contest, affords a moral demonstration, that its prevalence was properly MIRACULOUS and therefore DIVINE. Should I adventure farther on this great argument, I propose to examine distinctly each of those five causes of the growth of Christianity alleged by this Historian; and to assert the divinity of the Christian Religion[195]

as proved by each of them in turn, which he then set out in Gibbon's own words. This work remained unwritten, and Gibbon was able, while complimenting Apthorp not insincerely on his learning and courtesy, to observe that his outworks had remained at a distance from Gibbon's citadel.[196] McCloy may have been right in suggesting that his failure to write it was due to the rapid promotion which he received, possibly in recognition of his *Letters*;[197] but a further explanation might perhaps be found in the circumstance that the major work he did complete and publish was a volume of *Discourses on Prophecy* written in the succession to Warburton.[198] The Revelation of St John the Divine stands at the centre of his bibliography, and it is possible to see how his studies of civil history had led inescapably towards the Apocalypse. This would be a statement about the clerical culture of which Apthorp has a good deal to tell us.

(iv) THE 'CONFEDERATE DOCTORS' AND GIBBON'S *VINDICATION*

During 1778 there appeared two works in which Gibbon was criticised with marginal reference to controversies with which he had relatively little to do. William Burgh, a layman and supporter of the established Church of England, published at York *An Enquiry into the Beliefs of the Christians of the First Three Centuries*.[199] This is a lengthy polemic against Theophilus Lindsey, who had lately quit the Church to declare himself a unitarian;[200] Gibbon appears for the first time in the context of the smouldering discontent which was to lead anti-Trinitarians and Dissenters towards sympathy with the American and French Revolutions.[201] Burgh, however, gives no sign that he sees a link between the *Decline and Fall* and the anti-Trinitarian movement; he defends the authority of the Apocalypse[202] and the tradition

[195] Ibid., pp. 361–2. [196] Gibbon, *Vindication*; Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1155.
[197] McCloy, [1933], p. 110 and n. 1. [198] Apthorp, 1786.
[199] Burgh, 1778; McCloy [1933], pp. 164–8; ODNB, VIII, pp. 795–6.
[200] ODNB, XXXIII, pp. 908–9. [201] Haakonssen, 1996. [202] Burgh, 1778, pp. 175–6n.

of Pilate's letter to Tiberius[203] against Gibbon's critical objections, and pursues the implications of chapter 15 no further than that. The time to see Gibbon in the *crisi dell'Antico Regime*[204] has not yet arrived. It was also in 1778 that Archibald Maclaine, the translator of Mosheim, published in London *A Series of Letters Addressed to Soame Jenyns, Esq.*,[205] which brought the latter's connection with the Gibbon controversy a little closer. Maclaine wished to attack Jenyns's radical separation between the supernatural and the social virtues, as part of his argument that the *View of the Internal Evidence* left Jenyns needlessly obliged to choose between enthusiasm and deism. His defence of 'valour, patriotism and friendship' leaves Maclaine's position somewhat more Moderate in the Scottish sense and less evangelical than those of Salisbury and Apthorp; he argues that ancient philosophy was close enough to theism to need only to be perfected by the Christian revelation; but he does not address Gibbon's two chapters in terms of the tension between the sacred and the social. He gives Rousseau a more conspicuous role[206] than he does Gibbon, and merely applauds Watson's answer to the latter.[207] Near the outset of his work, however, there is a remark that indicates the direction in which the criticism of Gibbon would develop. He tells Jenyns that his response to him has been affected by reading Gibbon's 'perpetual and unnecessary sneer'; unnecessary because

> Mr Gibbon lives in a country where a man may write and speak as he thinks, without danger or molestation.[208] He was, therefore, under no necessity of aping the manner of some of the French Philosophers (as they are pleased to call themselves) who cover their infidelity with a sedate and well-disguised irony, to escape the secular arm of Religious persecution. – It is true, a sneer may have its place and time; but surely its *place* cannot be historical narrative, when Christianity is the subject of discussion.[209]

The indignation of all Gibbon's readers at what they took to be the irony and innuendo with which he wrote of the sacred was to place discussion of the 'sneer' ahead of attempts to give the primary cause supremacy over the secondary, or to confront him on the relation between the supernatural

[203] Ibid., pp. 390–400. On p. 309, Burgh appears to agree with Gibbon that Cyprian was moved in part by temporal ambition towards his martyrdom.

[204] The term is Franco Venturi's. I accept J. C. D. Clark's suggestion that the Revolution Settlement and the Union constituted Britain's *ancien régime*, which survived the impact of the French Revolution though changing in response to it.

[205] Maclaine, 1778. [206] Ibid., p. 114.

[207] Ibid., pp. 241–2. I am indebted to James Moore (Concordia University) for discussion of Maclaine; see his forthcoming work on Francis Hutcheson and his students.

[208] Maclaine does not tell us what he thinks about the liberty of expression in Holland, where he was then living.

[209] Maclaine, 1778, pp. 7–8n.

and the social. It is almost as a consequence of this that Maclaine echoes Hugh Blair in asking what Gibbon's view of revelation has to do with the historical narrative he is constructing; but Maclaine does not join Salisbury and Apthorp – or Jenyns? – in constructing a narrative with revelation at its centre. He was an expatriate Irish Scot living in the Netherlands, and though he published his reply to Jenyns in London, he was not immediately involved in the defence of either British church against its adversaries. The same may be true of a third work appearing in 1778 in which criticisms of Gibbon are to be found.

This is *Remains of Christian Antiquity, with Explanatory Notes*,[210] the second of a series of works published at Edinburgh over a period of years by Sir David Dalrymple, Lord Hailes of the College of Justice.[211] A third volume appeared in 1780 and a fourth in 1781. Though Scottish in its provenance, it is not clear that this work introduces us to a distinctively Scottish debate over Gibbon's first volume. All English replies to the two chapters imply questions of Trinity and episcopacy, the high church and the low; they present deism as a series of pitfalls that lie beyond Hoadly, and look towards questions about what happened in 1688–9. We might seek for responses to Gibbon emerging from a Scottish argument of a similar kind, between Presbyterians and patrons, Moderates and the Popular party;[212] but it may be a mistake to look for any such in Dalrymple. Educated at Eton, he had indeed gone on to the University of Utrecht rather than subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles at Oxford or Cambridge; but his volume of 1778 is dedicated to Thomas Newton, bishop of Bristol, and in later years he kept up a correspondence with Richard Hurd, Warburton's former hatchet-man, now bishop of Worcester, in which malicious remarks about Gibbon occur.[213] Perhaps we should not look to Lord Hailes for any systematic Presbyterian response to chapters 15 and 16, and it is not known that one exists. There is little sign so far that the history of the early Church was an issue of debate in Moderate Scotland.

In later years – it will be remembered that we are here concerned with criticisms of Gibbon's first volume that appeared before the publication of his second – Dalrymple developed his observations into a systematic work on the five causes;[214] but his volume of 1778 does not engage with chapter 15

[210] Dalrymple, 1778, 1780. For his further works see McCloy [1933], pp. 205–8.
[211] ODNB, xiv, pp. 979–82.
[212] The focus of recent work on Scottish ecclesiastical history has been on the historiography of the Reformation. Allan, 1993; McIntosh, 1998.
[213] For items in Hurd's correspondence see Womersley, 1997a, pp. 258, 262, 287, 302. Patrick Cadell (ODNB) observes that Dalrymple wrote mainly about the Church of England.
[214] Dalrymple, 1786. ODNB, xiv, p. 981.

or make any statement about its intentions. He respects the *Decline and Fall* as a great history[215] and joins in its enquiries;[216] he concedes that it has aroused opposition;[217] he thinks Gibbon understates both persecution and martyrdom[218] and is unduly harsh about Eusebius.[219] But so far at least, Gibbon raises no theological or ecclesiastical problems for Dalrymple, and the 1778 volume is largely an exercise in the minute correction of evidence and testimony for which Lord Hailes was renowned on the bench.[220]

The remaining criticisms of the two chapters published in 1778 are those to which Gibbon publicly replied. James Chelsum published a new edition of his *Remarks on the Two Last Chapters of Mr Gibbon's History*, two and a half times the length of that of 1776,[221] and David Womersley has convincingly argued[222] that this, rather than Henry Davis's *Examination of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters*, later in 1778,[223] was the occasion and target of Gibbon's *Vindication of Some Passages . . .* appearing soon afterwards.[224] Chelsum sent a complimentary copy of the *Remarks* to Gibbon, who refused to accept it on the grounds that it contained too many personal reflections,[225] but this complaint is hard to sustain[226] and raises questions about the nature of Gibbon's response. Chelsum's original *Remarks* had been published anonymously in London, but the 1778 edition is published in Oxford by the Clarendon Press and bears both the author's name and credentials, and the imprimatur of George Horne (a later critic of Gibbon) as vice-chancellor.[227] It acknowledges and tabulates contributions by Thomas Randolph, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity,[228] and is dedicated to Frederick Cornwallis, archbishop of Canterbury.[229] Gibbon had

[215] Dalrymple, 1778, pp. ix, xi, 114; Dalrymple, 1780, 'Notes and illustrations', pp. 34–8 ('the great work of Mr Gibbon'), 111 (the words repeated).
[216] Dalrymple, 1778, pp. 98–9. [217] Dalrymple, 1780, p. 38.
[218] Ibid., pp. 52–3. [219] Ibid., pp. 86–91.
[220] McCloy [1933], p. 207. For minor corrections of Gibbon, Dalrymple, 1778, pp. 116–17, 122, 162–3, 172; Dalrymple, 1780, pp. 4–6, 14, 100–1, 111–13, 130–1.
[221] Chelsum, 1778; 243 pages, compared with 94 in 1776.
[222] Womersley, 2002, ch. 2, esp. Section III. [223] Davis, 1778.
[224] Gibbon, 1779. [225] *Letters*, II, pp. 173–4; Womersley, 2002, pp. 57–8.
[226] The manuscript of Gibbon's letter of rejection has been lost (*Letters*, II, p. 172), but the printed texts (originally MW, II, p. cxxii) italicise, as if Gibbon originally emphasised, the following list of epithets: '*ungenerous*, *unmanly*, *indecent*, *illiberal*, *partial . . . being deficient in common candour*, *seriously concealing the truth*, *violating the faith of history*, etc.'. Of these a scan of the printed text of 1778, presumably that seen and rejected by Gibbon, yields the following: 'ungenerous and indecent' (p. xi), 'unmanly' (p. xii), 'common candour' (p. 160), 'concealing studiously' (p. 181). In the 1776 text, which Gibbon also saw, 'ungenerous' appears at pp. 2 and 89, 'concealing studiously' at p. 57, 'partial' at p. 93. 'Indecent', 'illiberal' and 'violating the faith' seem not to occur. It is hard to sustain Gibbon's charge that 'almost every page is stained' with these 'epithets'.
[227] Chelsum, 1778, title page, dated 'Jan. 3, 1778'. For Horne on Gibbon see Aston, 1995.
[228] Chelsum, 1778, p. xiv.
[229] See title page. Chelsum identifies himself as chaplain to the bishop of Worcester.

reason to believe that he was under attack by the 'confederate doctors'[230] of Oxford and the Church of England.

Chelsum's tone in 1778 is censorious and severe; he says that Gibbon has been misled by partiality into errors that injure his otherwise great credit as a historian;[231] but he is not engaged in an invective like that about to be delivered by Davis, or like the passionate accusations of Smyth Loftus. The latter had seen Gibbon as utterly committed to a deist offensive against the Christian religion, but Chelsum connects him less with Voltaire (mentioned twice),[232] Bolingbroke (never mentioned) or even Hume (mentioned in connection with miracles and polytheism),[233] than with Middleton and Barbeyrac, neither of them avowed deists though sufficiently hostile to the Fathers to appear enemies to the Christian tradition they claim to be defending.[234] A critique of Barbeyrac's *Morale des pères* takes up much of Chelsum's preface[235] and the engagement with Middleton many pages of his text.[236] At times he seems to be arguing with Middleton directly,[237] but his general strategy is to show that Gibbon's reliance on these authors has led him into unjustified statements, and that this in turn is part of a prejudice against Christianity which has marred his work in the same way. Barbeyrac and Middleton are held to have turned him against the Fathers, and Middleton is of course prominent in the debate over Gibbon's view of miracles. Here he is joined by Hume; but the latter's account of the credibility of miracles is said to have been decisively refuted,[238] and he is more prominent in the discussion of polytheism. Hume's claim that polytheism preceded monotheism is incompatible with the Christian history of Gentile religion, and Chelsum fastens on his imaginative venture into science-fiction, where Hume suggests that there may be a planet somewhere on which the forces driving the universe have generated beings not unlike the gods of pagan antiquity.[239] This is probably as close as Hume ever came to Spinozism, but Chelsum makes only the point that modern scepticism – he does not appear to call it deism – leaves the door open to strange beliefs.

[230] Gibbon, *Vindication*; Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1184. [231] Chelsum, 1778, pp. x–xiii, and passim.
[232] Ibid., pp. 114–15, 204. [233] Ibid., pp. 50–1n, 99–100, 172n.
[234] Ibid., p. iv: 'themselves the declared Friends of Christianity'.
[235] Ibid., pp. v–x; also 106, 108–9.
[236] Ibid., pp. iv–v, 55n, 67–81, 91 ('that ingenious but treacherous Author'). The last becomes a general defence of the miraculous powers (pp. 91–100).
[237] Ibid., pp. 73–5. [238] Ibid., pp. 99–100.
[239] Ibid., pp. 50–1. The reference is to Hume's *Natural History of Religion*. Hume, 1757 (repr. 1995), p. 68.

Chelsum's aim was to undermine Gibbon systematically, by showing that a prejudice against Christianity, combined with a reliance on imperfectly Christian authors, had led him into errors damaging to his standing as a historian. Sometimes this charge takes the tone of a prosecuting counsel; Gibbon is held responsible for all anti-Christian statements he quotes from gnostics and heretics;[240] but Chelsum is able to make some points of substance. He argues (as he had in 1776) that if, as Gibbon concedes, the immortality of the soul can be assured only by revelation, belief in it is part of the primary cause of the spread of Christianity, not one of Gibbon's five secondary causes.[241] He asserts with some weight that Gibbon has explained the zeal of Christians to convert but not the readiness of pagans to be converted, and that his account of polytheism explains only the popular fury against the Christians; it is not credible that cultic religion was undermined by the scepticism of philosophers who in fact endorsed it.[242] These are points with some bearing on the central issue raised by chapter 15. Chelsum defends the place of pre-Exilic Israel in sacred history against Gibbon's Voltairean remark that the Jews throughout their history have hated the rest of mankind.[243] He criticises Gibbon for adopting the hostile account of the Christians given by Tacitus,[244] defends the canonicity of the Apocalypse,[245] and embarks on a detailed but cautious defence of the passages in Josephus which Gibbon and others consider Christian interpolations.[246] His critical climax is a lengthy defence of Eusebius against Gibbon's attack on his good faith.[247]

Other critics had made points like these, and Chelsum's work is close to becoming a generalised criticism based on the assumption that any weakening of the secondary causes strengthens the case for the primary. There are two footnote references to Salisbury's translation of Bullet[248] – so that Gibbon, who read Chelsum attentively, could have known of that work's existence – but Chelsum does not follow Apthorp into constructing a history with divine revelation at its centre. The *Remarks* of 1778 constitute a reasonable,[249] severe but not abusive inquest upon Gibbon's use of

[240] Chelsum, 1778, pp. 31–4, esp. 32n. He similarly blames Gibbon for condemning Christianity on the dubious authority of Tertullian (p. 64).

[241] Ibid., pp. 9–11, 52–3. See also his lengthy study (pp. 80–91) of the episode of Theophilus and Autolycus, where miraculous raisings of the dead are distinguished from the general resurrection.

[242] Ibid., pp. 139–45, 161–2, 171–2.

[243] Ibid., pp. 19 [wrongly 29] –25; a vindication of Maimonides against Gibbon.

[244] Ibid., pp. 178–9. [245] Ibid., pp. 55–62. [246] Ibid., pp. 179–85.

[247] Ibid., pp. 220–36. [248] Ibid., pp. 167n, 186n.

[249] 'The *Remarks* now before us are written in a candid and liberal manner; they shew the Author to be a scholar and a gentleman, and they contain some things that merit Mr Gibbon's attention' (*Monthly Review*, 55 (December), 1776, p. 462). This judgement may on the whole be accepted.

sources, but hardly the grand vindication of the Christian history Gibbon was blamed for implicitly attacking. Gibbon might have felt the need to make a scholarly reply to Chelsum's criticisms, but the *Remarks* were soon overtaken by the more violent invective of Henry Davis which furnished Gibbon with an easier target.[250] Neither, however, challenged Gibbon to state his position on the Christian revelation and the history following from it once accepted; and he was able to maintain the silence that continued to occasion the controversy.

Davis published his *Examination of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of Mr Gibbon's History* in London, probably in May of 1778.[251] He was twenty-two years of age and a recent Bachelor of Arts of Balliol College. What led to the publication of his work is not known, but it is easy to imagine an ambitious graduate student encouraged to publish by some admiring senior. Gibbon was able to bracket him with Chelsum and Randolph as forming an Oxford confederacy – Horace Walpole called it a 'cabal'[252] – aimed at discrediting him as a historian and scholar. This was certainly Davis's intention, pursued more crudely than by any predecessor; he accused Gibbon of misrepresentation, misquotation, failure to master his sources and repeatedly of plagiarism. Gibbon was able to say, and to feel, that his integrity and personal honour were being assailed, so that he was obliged to write and publish the *Vindication* that appeared later that year. Before doing so he took counsel from friends, including Walpole, Robertson, Holroyd and others; and David Womersley has shown that some of these discussions antedated Davis's *Examination*, so that the latter was to some degree a secondary target masking the need to reply to Chelsum's *Remarks* as the more serious criticism.[253] Gibbon's refusal to accept Chelsum's tract as a gift suggests that he was already either over-sensitive to personal attacks or preparing to reject serious criticism as personal; and the *Vindication* rejects both Chelsum and Randolph as 'the confederate doctors' who fall short of Richard Watson in common politeness.[254] This charge could certainly be brought against Davis. It needs to be remembered, however, that Chelsum had employed the strategy of criticising chapters 15 and 16 on grounds of scholarship, rather than engaging like Salisbury or Apthorp in a history of revelation – as if, once again, any weaknesses in stating the case for the secondary causes implicitly strengthened the case for the primary – and that this left him (like others) as silent as Gibbon

[250] I follow on this point the argument of Womersley; n. 222 above.
[251] Davis, 1778. Extracts in Womersley, 1997b, pp. 185–214. For the author's short life, see ODNB, xv, p. 443.
[252] Qu. Womersley, 2002, p. 69. [253] Ibid., pp. 57–9, 66–71. [254] Womersley, 1994, iii, p. 1160.

himself on the nature of revelation, and on the question of how, how far and even whether Gibbon had launched an attack on it. Behind all the sound and fury of controversy lurks an *argumentum ex silentio*.

'It does not appear', says Davis with some justification,

> to have been essential to his story to touch at all on '*the Rise and Progress of Christianity*', much less to make so long a digression, which seems to have been wrought up with so much art, and care and ingenuity, that we can easily trace the author's predilection for the subject. He treats it indeed *con amore*, which has induced many judicious persons to suspect, that the rest of the volume was written to introduce these two chapters with a better grace, and more decent appearance.[255]

It was Hugh Blair's point in reverse, leading to an evidently absurd conclusion, which Gibbon could and did refute by continuing to write the *Decline and Fall* without further reference to the Christian revelation as a debatable issue. Davis understood this, and says in concluding his *Examination*:

> I could wish to advise him (would he accept of such humble counsel), when he favours us with his next volume, to keep close to his department as an historian, and to drop the character of a champion of infidelity, which, he may now find, has not added to his literary fame. In the prosecution of his plan, it will fall naturally in his way to treat of the *corruptions* of Christianity; and as his *diligence* and *accuracy*[256] will find ample materials for accounting for the rise and progress of *popery* from *natural causes*, we trust that he will not continue to attack genuine Christianity; at least, that he will, for the future, beware of such arts as have been sufficiently exposed in the foregoing sheets.[257]

This was fair criticism, which it could well be argued Gibbon accepted by continuing the *Decline and Fall* in just the way enjoined by Davis. But the damage was done. There remained the implicit – or was it the undeveloped? – refusal to treat of the Christian revelation, and the more stubbornly Gibbon maintained silence on this matter, the greater grew suspicion of his intentions, until the two chapters must either be ejected from the work or supposed to control it. Gibbon might and did continue his history without reference to them, but he could not leave behind the question why they were there at all. It must be asked, but could not be answered by study of what he wrote in his succeeding volumes, and therefore continued to smoulder.

Davis's *Examination* confronts Gibbon on several of the issues raised for most critics by chapter 15: the integrity of the Fathers, the question of

[255] Womersley, 1997b, p. 185.
[256] The italicised words were used of Gibbon by critics Davis thought too lenient.
[257] Womersley, 1997b, p. 214.

miracles, the morals of the first Christians; and there is a lengthy defence of pre-Exilic Israel against the charges of obscurity and misanthropy.[258] In his concluding sentence, however, he had taken his stand on the numerous accusations of scholarly impropriety he had brought against Gibbon, and it was to these that Gibbon wrote what he intended as the annihilating reply of the *Vindication*.[259] This work, aimed primarily at Davis, includes Chelsum and Randolph in the charge of unmannerly personalities, together with the minor figure of Francis Eyre[260] and some further polite responses to Watson and Apthorp. It meets its principal adversaries on the ground chosen by them, that of scholarly unreliability,[261] and we look in vain for any indication on Gibbon's part of what he had meant to achieve by the separation of primary and secondary causes. He cites Watson as conceding that the acknowledgement of the primary cause in chapter 15 is sufficient,[262] but does not respond to those who have held that it is not; he therefore abstains from, or avoids, any statement of what he believes it to have been. He says of Middleton that he 'rose to the highest pitch of scepticism, in any wise consonant with Religion';[263] but the context in which he situates him is that of the choice between criticism and credulity. He defends himself on a number of issues raised by his critics generally: the history of the Jews against Davis;[264] the canonicity of the Apocalypse;[265] the extent of the spread of Christianity;[266] the tolerant character of polytheism;[267] the Christian attitude to military service;[268] and perhaps at greatest length of all, the character and credit of Eusebius.[269] The major topics of belief in immortality and in miracles are not dealt with, for the reason that Davis had not accused him of plagiarism in writing about them; but the *Vindication* is a selective reply to his critics, who had themselves selected the issues on which they would confront him. Gibbon's scepticism remained, and remains, much attacked and defended but seldom defined.

The combat between Gibbon and the Oxford scholars did not end with the *Vindication*. Davis published a *Reply to Mr Gibbon's Vindication*[270] in 1779, chiefly notable for its detailed account of Jewish history before and after the Captivity – perhaps this was to have been his special field – in which he made the not unjustified point that Gibbon's impulse to decry the Jews

[258] Ibid., pp. 188–202. [259] Gibbon, 1779; text in Womersley, 1994, III, pp. 1106–84.
[260] [Eyre] 1778, 1779; McCloy [1933], pp. 173–8. He was a Catholic, as Gibbon did not fail to notice; Womersley, 1994, III, pp. 1182–3.
[261] Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1110: 'the very dirty ground which he [Davis] has chosen for the scene of our combat'.
[262] Ibid., p. 1156. [263] Ibid., p. 1151. [264] Ibid., pp. 1116–24. [265] Ibid., pp. 1127–9.
[266] Ibid., pp. 1142–4, 1147–8. [267] Ibid., pp. 1135–6, 1157–8. [268] Ibid., pp. 1162–70.
[269] Ibid., pp. 1130–4, 1170–81. [270] Davis, 1779. There are footnote references to Burgh on p. 9.

throughout their history was drawn from Voltaire.[271] Chelsum returned to the attack as late as 1785 (by which time volume II of the *Decline and Fall* had appeared)[272] with a similarly entitled work[273] published at Winchester, where the 'late Student of *Christchurch*' was rector of a Hampshire parish, having secured no greater distinction.[274] Davis had by now died at twenty-six[275] and Randolph at eighty-two. Chelsum defended himself, not without dignity, against Gibbon's invective-laden charge of having written invective himself, and returned to several of the issues long in contention. On the reliability of Eusebius he notes that a further defence of the historian has been published in Edinburgh by a distinguished scholar who can only be Lord Hailes[276] and whose station in a neighbouring kingdom sets him apart from 'the Watchmen of the Holy City'[277] – a jeering phrase of Gibbon's which Chelsum gladly accepts[278] but seems to confine to clergy of the Church of England. So ends Oxford's role in the controversy, the importance of which has been fully displayed by David Womersley, as helping to fix 'the historian's reputation'.[279] This indeed it did; whether it clarified his intentions is another question.

(v) after the *Vindication*: Milner and Taylor

About the time of the appearance of volume II of the *Decline and Fall*[280] there were published two works by men of ability, which may be used to complete an account of the reception of the two chapters and how it had determined Gibbon's reputation before he resumed the narrative he had interrupted to write them. Joseph Milner, headmaster of a grammar school at Hull, was an evangelical active in Yorkshire and (through his brother Isaac) at Cambridge.[281] His *Gibbon's Account of Christianity Considered*,

[271] Ibid., pp. 98–154, 161–70. [272] Chelsum, 1785, pp. 128–32.

[273] *A Reply to Mr Gibbon's Vindication . . . containing a Review of the Errors still Contained in These Chapters. By James Chelsum*, D. D. . . . Rector of Droxford, Hants; and Late Student of *Christchurch, Oxford*.

[274] 'Poor Chelsum was indeed neglected' (Gibbon, A, p. 317). Gibbon wished to represent his clerical opponents as in search of preferment. He is said (ODNB, XI, p. 300) to have been a man of somewhat forbidding personality.

[275] He took priest's orders in 1780 and became fellow and tutor of Balliol College.

[276] Chelsum, 1785, p. 65. The work referred to is volume III of *Remains of Christian Antiquity*.

[277] Ibid.: 'his high judicial station in a neighbouring part of the kingdom (for neither is this able and active defender of Christianity one of the appointed "Watchmen of the Holy City")'. Would Chelsum have included the Presbyterian clergy?

[278] Ibid., p. 2. [279] Womersley, 2002; title. [280] Milner, 1781, pp. viiin, 191n; Taylor, 1781, passim.

[281] ODNB, XXXVIII, pp. 319–20; for Isaac Milner, ibid., pp. 310–13. The brothers constructed a *History of the Church of Christ* (York and Cambridge, 1794–1809), intended as a corrective to Mosheim, whose emphasis on external conditions and internal disagreements they thought irrelevant to a history consisting wholly of actions by the Holy Spirit. This position was of interest to the young J. H. Newman. For a summary of the *History* see Walsh, 1959.

while far from the first to associate Gibbon with Hume,[282] is the first to connect him with *Some Strictures on Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, the second part of its title. Gibbon wrote of Milner that he

> pronounces an anathema against all rational Religion. *His* faith is a divine taste, a spiritual inspiration; *his* Church is a mystic and invisible body; the *natural* Christians, such as Mr Locke, who believe and interpret the Scriptures are in his judgement, no better than profane infidels[283]

a verdict accurate as to the facts, which helps us to see how the charge of deism against Gibbon took on a new intensity as English Christianity became increasingly evangelical. Milner is determined to be fair to Gibbon and attacks neither his scholarship nor his character.

> I do not apprehend that he has willfully misrepresented any tenet or passage, much less that his understanding is too weak to enable him to do justice to Christianity. His character of a Gentleman forbids the first; of a man of sense and a Scholar the second. It is very uncandid and illiberal (though I believe it is often done) to impute that to *design* which arises from *prejudice*. What object will not this last discolour? He who reads Mr Gibbon, with the least degree of attention, must see that he is strongly prejudiced against Christianity. Nor will it appear surprising, that not even his good judgment has secured him from a series of mistakes in every thing relating to this religion, from which, in all other parts of his history, the native force of a sound judgment, operating without controul, has happily secured him.[284]

The charge is that of Loftus, whose piety Milner shares, though he declines to add that of a fixed intent to undermine religion. He is also avoiding the tactic of Chelsum and Davis, whom he may have known only from Gibbon's *Vindication*; he says that after reading this and Watson's *Apology* he did not trouble himself with Gibbon's other critics, since he meant to proceed differently.[285] There ensues a series of chapters taking issue with Gibbon on themes now familiar: the character of the Jews, Gibbon's account of the gnostics, the Apocalypse, miracles, the character of Cyprian, martyrdom and persecution;[286] but these are prefaced by a censure, more severe than we might expect from the passage just quoted, of how prejudice has led Gibbon in a direction injurious to his character.

> Either Mr Gibbon believes the Bible to be God's word, or he does not; or, if he pleases to have it so, he is in doubt. Under none of these suppositions can his conduct be justified. As to the first case, words are superfluous: The second would ask a more manly and more open way of opposition; even the impious honesty of

[282] Ibid. (the third page). [283] A, p. 318n. [284] Milner, 1781, pp. v–vi.
[285] Ibid., p. vi. He does however mention Bullet on pp. 94, 101n and 153n.
[286] For these and other topics, see Milner's table of contents, ibid., pp. ix–xi.

Lord Bolingbroke, horrible as it is, is less offensive to a lover of plain dealing than the sly, insinuating, artful mode of Mr Gibbon. As a Gentleman, he must scorn it in common life; and the thing itself is so reprehensible, that I do not see any way but to deny the charge itself, is left for him, in order to attempt a vindication of his character on this point.

For one thing is clear, amidst all the mazes of his pen, that he cordially hates Christianity. It is not so easy a thing, even for Mr Gibbon, to disguise his heart . . . If then his guarded manner of speaking would not allow one to call him a Deist, this at least must be said, the whole of what he writes on religion has a Deistical tendency. But –[287]

We are back with the problem of the sneer – though Milner does not use that word – and the associated problem of deism. As a reader of Hume's *Dialogues*, he knew that the term was justifiable in this case only as a synonym for scepticism, there extended even to natural religion. The problem of the sneer is not only that Gibbon has taken no stand about the authenticity of the Bible; it is that we cannot even find the moment in his text where he is obliged to do so.[288] Yet all his readers are convinced that he does not believe in it. The problem becomes that of history. In the course of his narrative, Gibbon encountered something of which any statement must be a statement about belief, and what is unforgivable is that he makes no such statement. We may wish to say that he did not hate Christianity so much as he was untouched by it; but we have to do with Christians for whom you could not reject God's infinitely demanding love without hating it. The more obstinately Gibbon said nothing about it, the more his readers were driven to maximise both his malevolence and his cunning in conveying it.

A latter-day reader says with Hugh Blair that Gibbon had histories to write, to which his acceptance or rejection of Christ was irrelevant, and wonders why he did not acknowledge as a matter of history what belief in the primary cause was and entailed; after which he might have employed the five secondary causes, not to compete with revelation (as the critics all see that they fail to do), but to establish those things about Christianity's historical character that will furnish him with his narrative. It is important to realise that this would not have satisfied Milner, for whom revelation

[287] Ibid., pp. 2–4. 'But' and the dash after it conclude a paragraph.

[288] It was of course known that the Gospels had been composed at various times, and that there were problems attending their composition (Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 499–500). Gibbon owned copies of the works of Richard Simon (*Library*, pp. 251–2), but does not cite him in ch. 15. In n. 35 (Womersley, 1994, I, p. 458) he suggests that there are Gospel passages written to confute gnostic accounts of the life of Christ; a suggestion familiar to those who thought the Fourth Gospel written against Cerinthus.

mattered as history did not. At the end of his vindication of the authority of the book of Revelation (Apocalypse), we find him saying that the business of the historian is to find the course of events prophesied until the end of days; a study in which

> Mr Gibbon may see an use of his historic knowledge far more noble and liberal than any he has hitherto made of it. To trace the movements of Divine Providence must, surely, be a more grand and useful employment than to examine the springs of human artifice, and investigate all the laborious, but impotent, schemes of sublunary ambition. His historic page, in the subsequent parts of his work, may receive a strength of colouring, and a sublimity of conception even from this *unpromising subject*, while he acquaints his readers, as he goes along, how every thing in the history of the Church, of Mahometanism, of Pagan and Papal Rome, is only fulfilling the decrees of the Almighty exhibited in the Revelation.[289]

To Gibbon this would seem as ridiculous as it does to readers today; but as a matter of history, we have to accept that for Milner as for Apthorp it did not, and that Gibbon had to contend with a clerical culture for whom the meaning of history might be found in prophecy. The role of Napoleon as the Antichrist was already in the making, and it was a weak way of attacking the Apocalypse to ask when the Church had come to accept it.

In Part II of his treatise[290] Milner expounds the nature of what he calls 'evangelical truth'. It becomes clear that 'truth' is not dependent on verification, but on experience; it is not a body of propositions or doctrines which can be shown to be true by criticism, but a series of discoveries which the reader makes in and of himself

> when God Almighty publishes a book, and deigns to become the preceptor of his creatures.[291]

There is a Word, available in written and printed form, but its truth is discoverable not in writing about it, but in being changed by it.

> It is the evidence of internal experience: I feel myself thus lost and miserable: I experience such an healthful change in my whole moral system: – So that upon the whole, Christianity is the true cure of Scepticism; and to the seriously disposed, who submit to the teaching of the Spirit, it gives the highest internal evidence of its own truth.[292]

[289] Milner, 1781, p. 33. The words italicised conclude n. 67 to Gibbon's chapter 15 (Womersley, 1994, I, p. 469n).
[290] Ibid., pp. 83–101 (the second appearance of these page numbers; pp. 83–108 have previously been marked with an asterisk).
[291] Ibid., p. 89. [292] Ibid., p. 99.

This is not only Milner's reason for believing in the truth of Christianity, a belief irrefutable because not grounded in the adoption of a proposition or opinion; it is also the first or primary cause of the spread of Christianity in the ancient world that a great many people – Paul being the first to leave record of it – underwent this experience. Gibbon did not sufficiently recognise this fact; moderns may think he would have written better history in chapter 15 if he had; but for Milner the experience of redemption or regeneration is proof of its own truth and of others, perhaps propositional, connected with it, and he thinks Gibbon's refusal to address it is proof both of his unbelief and of his intention to destroy it. Our reading of chapter 15 must depend on whether we think the problem of belief and unbelief was as central to Gibbon as it was to Milner; did he write chapter 15 with such intentions?

Hugh Blair's view was that he did, but need not have; his purposes as historian did not depend upon his own acceptance or rejection of the Christian Word. Milner's reply is that such purposes are hardly worth pursuing in comparison. There is an Augustinian implication here; human salvation does not depend on human history. A rigorous Augustinian would add that it does not depend upon sacred history either; there is no salvific need for us to know that the course of history was revealed in coded language to John on Patmos. It may be a result of the Arminian and Enlightened turn towards works and society that Gibbon's evangelical critics insist upon prophecy and the historic future. Milner does not seem to have known Apthorp's work and we may wish we had his comments upon it; but he has something to say about the study of prophecy, by Thomas Newton (Dalrymple's dedicatee) and by Sir Isaac himself.[293] More importantly, we are at the point where we see Gibbon's judgement of Milner to be correct independently of its tone. He did see Christian beliefs as 'spiritual inspiration'; he did see the Church as 'a mystic and invisible body';[294] and he did condemn the 'rational Christianity', traceable to Locke and beyond, as leading direct to infidelity. It did so, he thought, by reducing experience to opinion.

Critics of Gibbon who were on the road from Warburtonian to evangelical positions needed to decide on the relation between supernatural and sociable virtues. Soame Jenyns had separated them radically, and Maclaine had accused him of facing a choice between scepticism and enthusiasm. Apthorp (and in another way William Robertson) had sketched a history in

[293] For Thomas Newton, bishop of Bristol, ibid., pp. 31, 34. 'Newton on the prophecies', p. 170n. For Isaac Newton's chronological and prophetic researches, pp. 35, 91*n.

[294] See Part III, section IX, 'A scriptural idea of the Church', ibid., pp. 154–62.

which revelation superseded the religions of sociability. Milner, who joined Jenyns in insisting that the love of glory was not a Christian virtue,[295] was committed by his faith in religious experience to a re-evaluation of enthusiasm. In the third part of his work against Gibbon he cast a wide net – it is with regret that one passes over a chapter headed 'Mr Gibbon's dangerous idea of lewdness exposed'[296] – but the main thrust of this section is towards a criticism of the direction taken by English Christianity since the Restoration (which Apthorp had praised as a triumph of sound doctrine).[297] Locke is a leading figure in this account,[298] but the process begins before him with the Cambridge latitudinarians and Platonists, of whom Burnet is the encomiast.[299] From Whichcote to Hume, the pursuit of reasonable religion has made the experience of regeneration the object of scrutiny by a philosophy inherently incapable of comprehending it.[300] Not only has this led to a coldness, indifference and formality[301] among professed Christians; it has exposed religion to those who think as the world does, and cannot but be hostile to it. The origin of Gibbon's supposed hatred of Christianity is to be found here. The process culminates in the Hume of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, who labours hard to prove

> that one scheme of Godhead is as good as another, with a view to reduce Polytheism, Spinozism, Christianity, and all sorts of views of the divinity to the same level of evidence, or rather of no evidence; and, on the ruin of all, to establish his horrible universal scepticism.[302]

The only hope for a world in which 'Voltaire, Rousseau, Hume and Gibbon'[303] contend for supremacy over the emptiness of the human mind must be found in a return to the experience of regeneration, immune by its nature from historical criticism; and if this is to be termed enthusiasm, we must find senses in which the term can be embraced.[304] Milner had reached a point where neither philosophy nor history had anything to say to the experience of regeneration; yet he still needed a prophetic scheme with a possibly imminent future.

[295] Part III, section V, ibid., pp. 135–42. [296] Part III, section V, ibid., pp. 148–53.
[297] Apthorp, 1778, pp. 171–2. [298] Milner, 1781, pp. 51–2, 154–5, 156, 157, 160–3, 199.
[299] Ibid., pp. 250–1. Cf. Apthorp's praise of Burnet above, p. 341.
[300] Milner, 1781, p. 195: 'Mr Gibbon's account of the primitive Christians must have arisen from the enmity of human nature, which has in this case betrayed his judgment.' Human nature is inherently depraved, yet 'judgment' may correct its conclusions.
[301] Ibid., pp. 241, 244. [302] Ibid., p. 200. [303] Ibid., p. 238.
[304] Ibid., p. 190: 'In all things else experience is allowed to be the best school-master; in religion only it is called *Enthusiasm*.'

Henry Taylor, who published his *Thoughts on the Nature of the Grand Apostasy, with Reflections and Observations on the XVth Chapter of Mr Gibbon's History* in the same year as Milner,[305] differed from other critics of the two chapters in being unorthodox in his beliefs.[306] He was Arian and Apollinarian in his Christology, and a warm opponent of imposed unity of doctrine.[307] More openly than Watson's,[308] his writings associate him with the current debate over subscription and the Trinity, and look towards the moment after 1782, when Gibbon's fiercest opponent would be the unitarian Joseph Priestley. His tract of 1781 was published by the unitarian bookseller Joseph Johnson,[309] and in the previous year he had written to inform Gibbon of an anti-Athanasian manuscript by Isaac Newton. Gibbon had thanked him for this,[310] but in 1781 followed his usual practice of buying a copy[311] and neglecting to answer it. In his autobiographies, however, he remarked:

> The stupendous title . . . first agitated my nerves, till I discovered that it was the apostasy of the whole Church since the Council of Nice, from Mr Taylor's private religion. His book is a strange mix of *high* enthusiasm and *low* buffoonery, and the *Millennium* is a fundamental article of his creed.[312]

This was a little less than fair. Taylor was not above resorting to the comic,[313] and enthusiasm and millenarianism are among his characteristics; but his Arianism was too widespread to be called a 'private religion', and 'the apostasy of the whole Church' antedates Nicaea, and is a comment on the human condition. What Gibbon failed to note, however, was that Taylor's unorthodoxy permitted him to become an astute commentator on the language and strategy of chapter 15, and embark on a critical defence of Gibbon which may not have been altogether ironic. His opening words are:

> I find in a note of Dr *Maclaine*, in his Letters to *Soame Jenyns*, Esq., as well as by other information, that many worthy and sensible men are offended at Mr *Gibbon*, for what the Doctor calls *unnecessary sneers* . . . and the Doctor looks upon this as dishonouring his subject. However, he allows that a sneer may have its place and time; but surely, he says, its *place* cannot be *historical narrative*, nor when *Christianity* is the subject of discussion.[314]

Most of Taylor's fifteen-page preface is a disquisition on the sneer, its use, function and legitimacy in religious debate when absurd propositions

[305] Taylor, 1781. [306] ODNB, LIII, pp. 899–900. [307] Taylor, 1781, pp. 30–1.
[308] Above, pp. 317–18. [309] Taylor, 1781, title page. For Johnson, see ODNB, XXX, pp. 282–4.
[310] *Letters*, II, pp. 244–5. [311] *Library*, p. 263. [312] A, p. 317n.
[313] Taylor, 1781, pp. 44–5, 114–17, 165–7. [314] Ibid., p. i.

are put forward. It was by now a frequent charge against Gibbon that he resorted to sneering and innuendo instead of stating his unbelief directly, and it was hard for his critics to pinpoint the exact objects of his sneers. Taylor observes:

> It appears indeed to me, that Mr *Gibbon* sometimes sneers at the very foundation of Christianity; but they *may* not appear so to him; and indeed they *cannot*, except he is guilty of an unpardonable duplicity, which we have no right to suppose.[315]

This is more than an appeal for a charitable reading. Taylor proceeds, as he moves into his first chapter, to argue that Gibbon is trapped in a fundamental confusion, not altogether of his own making. There are passages depicting him as the victim of his imaginings, reeling to and fro like a drunken man, which Gibbon cannot have appreciated if he ever read them.[316] This 'low buffoonery' is the surface froth of a serious argument, which is that Gibbon has confused the Christian faith and the Christian Church. Genuinely or not, Taylor affects to accept Gibbon's account of the primary cause of the spread of Christianity,

> the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself and the ruling providence of its great author,[317]

as a full and satisfactory profession that Christianity is a revelation distributed by divine energy, in making which Gibbon has established himself as a good Christian.[318] But what is revealed is a truth and acceptance of that revelation is a faith; the primary cause, therefore, is the cause and manifestation of the spread of that faith. What Gibbon has failed to recognise is that the Church is not the faith, but the society of those who profess that faith;[319] and the word 'profess' is notoriously ambiguous. Human imperfections will appear, and though Taylor baulks at Gibbon's use of the word 'inevitable', there can be no objection to the proposition that the history of the Church is, at the level of the secondary causes, a history of human error.[320] This will not be enough for Taylor, however; he is about to embark on the claim that the Church repeatedly apostasises from the faith, and that this 'grand apostasy' has a history. Being inherent in the human condition, it has no single cause and does not occur at a single moment. At its first appearance in the time of the Apostles, however, it is associable with false philosophy, encountered by Paul at Corinth and John at Ephesus.[321] Here are the beginnings of a history of apostasy to which Taylor will return.

[315] Ibid., p. iii [316] Ibid., pp. xi–xii. [317] Above, p. 8.
[318] Taylor, 1781, pp. ix, xii, 3, 7, 11–12. [319] Ibid., p. 4.
[320] Ibid., pp. 3–4, 5–6. [321] Ibid., pp. 5–6.

He is not aiming to condemn Gibbon as contributing to apostasy by his deism or scepticism, but to criticise his history as involved in a confusion. The secondary causes are so miscalled because they do not contribute to the spread of the faith but of the Church, and therefore contain much that will contribute to the growth of apostasy.[322] In Taylor's mind, this argument neutralises most of what Gibbon may have intended to say against 'the fundamentals of Christianity', and may neutralise most of the charges brought against him of having such intentions; it is obviously possible that Taylor's intentions regarding Gibbon were ironic. He proceeds to a long review of the five causes in turn, applauding what Gibbon says when he can show that it explains the corruptions of the Church, criticising it when it seems to mistake the nature of the Christian faith. Taylor is an ordained minister of the Church of England, not a dissenter, sectarian or freethinker; he does not condemn the Church wholly as this world's creature, but maintains that it does profess the faith from which it recurrently apostasises.[323] He can therefore rebuke Gibbon's 'partiality' in explaining everything it does by worldly motives,[324] while insisting that he probably did not mean to attack the faith, because he has failed to do so.

There is room both for criticism of Gibbon and for demonstration that his secondary causes do not reach the targets which others fear – whether or not Gibbon intended – they might destroy. Taylor has no difficulty demonstrating that what generates 'zeal' in Christians does not generate willingness to accept Christianity in polytheists, especially when it amounts to the demonisation of the latter's gods.[325] He does not share Apthorp's deep interest in the interactions between other-worldly and sociable religions, but joins him and others in agreeing that Gibbon has failed to show either Christian zeal or philosophic scepticism as intelligible sources for the erosion of paganism.[326] Can it then be explained by the sheer impact of the Christian message: the 'foolishness of the word' of Christ crucified, transformed into the 'convincing evidence of the doctrine itself'? Here we encounter the two supporting modes of evidence: miracles and the fulfilment of prophecy; but what Taylor has to say of them does more to illuminate his doctrine of the 'grand apostacy' than the primary cause of the spread of faith.

[322] Ibid., pp. 3–4, 8–9, 13–14, 39 (zeal as a cause of apostasy).
[323] Similarly with pre-Exilic Israel; the apostasies of which Gibbon had made much are located after the 'Theocracy' and under the kings (ibid., pp. 23–7).
[324] Ibid., pp. 64, 69–70, 105.
[325] Ibid., pp. 81–2 (demonology as a sign of apostasy). For a study of zeal (which Taylor frequently spells 'zele'), see pp. 14–18, 35–41.
[326] Ibid., pp. 139–40, 142–3, 149–50.

Since Taylor was anti-Trinitarian, we might expect him – as Gibbon assumed was the case – to locate the 'grand apostasy' at the Council of Nicaea, as the moment either of the ascendancy of Athanasian doctrine or the Church's surrender to unnecessary disputation. Anti-Athanasian implications are indeed to be found in his book,[327] but his history of apostasy ranges more widely. It begins as we have seen in the time of the Apostles, but if there is a crucial moment he locates this at the death of the last of them and the advent of the post-Apostolic Fathers. The miracles performed by the Apostles are indisputable, but the corruption of the Church begins when the Fathers begin making indiscriminate and inauthentic claims to their continuance; when they actually ceased is a separate matter.[328] With false miracles come superstition, saint-worship, inflated theology and the rise of clerical authority that will lead in time to popery. Taylor is an open follower of Conyers Middleton,[329] whom Gibbon had so often been accused of following without sufficient acknowledgement, and toward whom the historian's attitude was complex to the point of ambivalence. Those who consider Middleton and Gibbon crypto-sceptics have to contend with Taylor's employment of the former to arrive at positions he thought the latter had failed to recognise, and Gibbon thought proof of Taylor's enthusiasm and millenarianism.

For Taylor the grand apostasy was an apocalyptic event, a necessary stage in the process of salvation. It had pleased God to reveal to humans both the means of their redemption and the means by which this would come about in time; he had left them in time as a trial of their redeemability,[330] possessed of an encoded prophecy foretelling how redemption would come about. The fulfilment of prophecy outranked even the performance of miracles, since the latter had ceased and the former could not; this is why one of the longest sections in Taylor's book is concerned to refute Gibbon's claim that the Apocalypse or book of Revelation was of doubtful canonicity in the early Church.[331] The successive apostasies of the Fathers, the Councils and the establishment of Christianity as a religion of state were all moments in a process foretold in that book by symbolic language, and Gibbon's five causes – reducible to a history of the Church but not the faith – could be incorporated in that narrative. For Taylor as for Apthorp they

[327] Ibid., pp. 10, 132.
[328] Ibid., pp. 79, 88–9, 91–2, 94–5 (Theophilus and Autolycus), 97–8, 153–4.
[329] Ibid., pp. xiv, 30–1n, 79, 82n, 86n, 89–90 (Middleton defended against Gibbon), 91n, 92, 167. Taylor's reliance on Isaac Newton awaits study.
[330] Ibid., pp. 10, 14, 72–3, 76–7.
[331] Ibid., pp. vi (where it is suggested that the Apocalypse cannot be denied without denying revelation), 43–73.

led to the double triumph of Antichrist in the twin forms of papacy and Islam.[332] Where we are tempted to see his criticism of chapter 15 as a partial defence of Gibbon, leading to the rehabilitation of a secular history of the Church in the world, Taylor meant it to restore the history of revelation. Together with the orthodox Apthorp and the evangelical Milner, he aimed to conduct history to a present where the fall of the Roman Antichrist and the thousand years of the binding of Satan were at hand.[333] This was the position of the three most reflective and acute of Gibbon's critics, about a decade before the French Revolution would confront them with Antichrist in an altogether new form.

(vi) retrospect

This enquiry into the responses to Gibbon's two chapters has introduced us to a vigorous and articulate clerical culture which he could not altogether ignore but did not attempt to confront. To study the two chapters in the context these responses provide returns us to asking two questions. First, what did the respondents think he was saying and how did they reply to it; what has this to tell us about his intentions? Second, there is the question from which this book takes its departure: Hugh Blair's contention that 'attacking religion' does occur in the two chapters, but is irrelevant and therefore harmful to his purposes as a historian. These questions were raised at the end of the preceding chapter,[334] and we now return to them. It was earlier pointed out that Gibbon might not have written the two chapters at all. It would have been possible to proceed direct to the moment of Constantine's establishment of the Christian Church.[335] Subsequently, reasons were put forward why he might have decided that his history could not proceed without examination of how Roman culture was transformed into a culture of belief, and Roman government transformed by the intrusion of clerical authority. It might now be suggested that Gibbon wrote history in a culture of belief – belief that he did not share – and that statements about belief, such as a historian might wish to make, could not be restrained from becoming statements for and against belief, in which his evident unbelief was of greater significance than the statements he made as a historian. In that case, however, Hugh Blair would be asking too much in suggesting that the two kinds of statement should or could be separated, as is plain from his own judgement that Gibbon was 'attacking religion'.

[332] Ibid., pp. 129–33 (popery), 159–61, 168–9. [333] Ibid., p. 169.
[334] Above, pp. 306–10. [335] Above, pp. 4–6, 321, 335.

It is quite clear, however, that Gibbon's critics were less disturbed by anything he had said about Christian belief than by what he had not said and what they thought he had meant by not saying it. The point of departure for them all was his distinction between the primary and secondary causes of the spread of religion. The primary cause was held to be the character of Christianity as a revelation, spreading by its own divine energy, and Gibbon had offered to acknowledge this in the words 'the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself and the ruling providence of its great author'. There was nothing in these words to which a Christian could object, and yet the respondents with one exception agree in refusing to accept them as adequate or sincerely intended; the exception, Henry Taylor, may have intended to disarm Gibbon by accepting as sincere what had been written insincerely. It is equally clear that Gibbon could have satisfied his Christian readers by a full and detailed statement of the acceptance of Christianity as revelation; a statement he could have made as historian, irrespective of his own beliefs, as we may find him doing in the next chapter of this book. He chose, however, to summarise faith and revelation in a single sentence, brief enough to appear dismissive. To say that he could have done otherwise is to ask what he intended by doing as he did; but why did he not do what he might have done?

History was not yet autonomous enough – Levine in the affirmative notwithstanding[336] – to treat belief simply as history. Gibbon could not avoid, and may not have intended to avoid, his words being taken as a statement of unbelief; but instead of stating a case against belief, he had chosen to pay it lip service in words that conveyed insincerity. Here his critics accused him of what came to be known as the 'sneer': the use of language that conveyed the opposite of its apparent meaning, in the absence of open opposition. Even Taylor defended the sneer by placing spin upon it. The charge of sneering arose, however, less from the tone of irony Gibbon employed in speaking of the transmission and explication of Christian doctrine – though the effect of this on pious readers should never be minimised – than from his refusal to say anything whatever about the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Gibbon never says a word about Christ and his revelation, but the less he says about it – the more he observes 'the impenetrable silence of the Roman historian' – the more he is accused of attacking it indirectly, and the further his destructive intentions are supposed to reach.

Gibbon's critics can be seen pursuing a mixture of strategies. They could continue an invective against the sneer, modified as an accusation of

[336] Levine, 1999.

habitual prejudice against Christianity; as there was substance in this, the complaint against Gibbon's use of indirect and ironic literary techniques persisted, to become perhaps the most powerful instrument by which his critics shaped his reputation. But it was insecurely founded on the absence in the *Decline and Fall* of any specific arguments against the Christian revelation, and Gibbon's opponents were driven to seek specific means of refuting what they thought he had left to be inferred. Each of them therefore sought to review and refute his five causes, on the assumption that they were intended to displace the primary cause and furnish a secular explanation of the spread of Christianity, whether as imposture, error or a revolution in manners. Here the critics were sometimes successful. They were on solid (if Warburtonian) ground in pointing out that if, as Gibbon had no doubt ironically conceded, the truth of personal immortality could be established only by revelation, belief in it was part of the primary cause and not a secondary. They seem also to have been successful in arguing that Gibbon had explained the zeal of Christians to make converts better than the willingness of pagans to be converted, and that the rejection of the gods and the cultic sociability of polytheism explained why Christians were persecuted better than why polytheism decayed. Here, however, the critics were in danger of supposing that any weakening of the secondary causes for the spread of Christianity strengthened the argument that only divine energy could account for its growth; and in the hands of the Oxford critics this became the indiscriminate assault on Gibbon's scholarship to which he replied in the *Vindication*.

This angry exchange left unsettled the question of what Gibbon's intentions were, and whether they added up to a unified purpose. It has been possible to suggest that two at least of the five causes do less to explain the spread of the new religion than to establish the character Christians possessed as new actors in a history Gibbon was beginning to follow along the paths they would open to it. The confrontation between Christianity and polytheism offered, first, an explanation of the persecutions, and second, the opening of a Humean narrative of Christianity as perpetually oscillating between enthusiasm and superstition, which Gibbon was to pursue in later chapters of the *Decline and Fall*. If he had suggested that this supplied a natural history of the Christian religion that did away with the thought of a revelation, his action would have been radically subversive; but he did not make this suggestion and nobody seems to have accused him of implying it. Instead, a group of writers from Soame Jenyns to East Apthorp pursued the partly Warburtonian thought that Christianity confronted a sociable and pantheistic polytheism with a religion whose extra-social appeal to

supernatural values was proof of its supernatural origin, and Apthorp sketched a universal history along these lines. He did not sufficiently challenge Gibbon to reply to it, and if Gibbon was aware of its presence he was able to ignore it. This, however, was a point at which 'attacking religion' might have been connected with the 'historical purposes' to which Hugh Blair thought Gibbon's chapters irrelevant.

The last of the five causes, 'the union and discipline of the Church', led Gibbon to the historical innovation that he seems to have considered of the greatest narrative importance: the rise of a clergy or priesthood claiming on spiritual grounds an authority competitive with that of the emperors or the state. Ultimately this rested on the claim that a revelation had occurred in Christ, immediately on the rise of disputation as to what that revelation had been; Gibbon was able to rely on the Christian historian Mosheim for the greater part of his account of how a clergy had emerged. Between 1776 and 1781, however, the fifth cause figures very little in the controversy over the two chapters; current debates between episcopacy and presbytery, trinity and unity, priestly and magisterial authority, play no part in that literature – the case of Cyprian of Carthage perhaps excepted – and seem not to have motivated any author to come to Gibbon's defence. The reason may simply be that chapters 15 and 16 do not arrive at the reign of Constantine and the Council of Nicaea, when it was common ground that theological disputation had begun and the Church's authority had become disputable. From Chelsum to Taylor, however, it is agreed among Gibbon's critics – good Protestants all, with the exception of Francis Eyre – that the coming volumes of the *Decline and Fall* will sooner rather than later arrive at times when the Church begins to be corrupt and many of his charges against Christianity begin to be valid. They blame him only for bringing these charges too soon; and the accusation that he is over-reliant on Middleton has to do with his imprecision in not following exactly the latter's claim that corruption began with the post-Apostolic Fathers.[337] It is a point at which Gibbon might have been a more observant if unorthodox historian of the pre-Constantinian Church than he was in the two chapters of 1776.

If it is also a point at which we find ourselves endorsing the criticism launched by Blair, we must still decide how far the separation of the primary

[337] See Taylor's conclusion to his preface (pp. xiv–xv): 'if good Protestants will be so jealous as to take to themselves all that is said by Sir *Isaac Newton*, or Mr *Gibbon*, or any other writers against the monks; and all that may be pointed by Dr *Middleton* and others, against the lying testimony of the monkish Fathers to support the worship of the dead, and other errors of the grand apostasy; and suspect it to be meaned [sic] against Christianity in general, or the Protestant religion; they fear where no fear is, and object to the only arguments which are able to support the truth'.

from the secondary causes entailed the implicit denial of revelation all critics perceived in it, and account for Gibbon's motives in launching whatever attack on religion we perceive as implicit therein. In an insightful account of Gibbon's religion Peter Ghosh has suggested that he was a 'sceptical fideist' and therefore not an 'atheist [nor] a Humean sceptic'.[338] I should like to refine this by proposing that he never reserved the option of faith for himself, but recognised its ineradicability in others, for reasons of which Humean scepticism was capable of giving an ironic account. The lines from Charles Williams prefixed to this section of the volume display this in poetic terms, and the criticism by Joseph Milner conveys the rejection of irony by experience. There is an alternative, perhaps not incompatible, reading. The two chapters may after all be less than perfectly coherent, and Hugh Blair may have placed his finger on that. We know that Gibbon was working at them under self-induced pressure in the summer of 1775; it is possible, and tempting to those who know the experience of authorship, that he was overtaken by the need to state a series of positions, discovering how they were related to each other only in the process of reducing them to writing.[339] It seems possible to decide that they do not fully cohere in the two chapters, and that this left his critics both able and compelled to maximise the destructive intentions Gibbon had conveyed by means of the 'sneer'. The many Enlightened and agnostic critics and historians who have applauded him for conveying doubt by polished irony are saying the same thing with the value signs reversed. We arrive at the point where 'the historian's reputation' gives place to what has elsewhere been called 'the invention of Edward Gibbon',[340] meaning that of the polished stylist who promoted Enlightenment by indirectly intimating the invalidity of the Christian faith. This figure, created between 1776 and 1781 by readers of chapters 15 and 16, antedates the volumes of the *Decline and Fall* that relate the history of Christian empire, and in the minds of many readers then and since outweighs – as Blair feared it would – the figure of the historian who wrote them. If Gibbon had not published the two chapters when and as he did, the earlier figure might not have come into being. He is not the creation of 'the historian of the Roman empire', but owes much to the latter's 'impenetrable silence'.

[338] Ghosh, 1997, p. 128 and n.

[339] In a thoughtful review of earlier volumes of *Barbarism and Religion*, Ralph Lerner reminds me that Gibbon's introduction to the *Decline and Fall* was most likely written after he completed the two chapters and says it is 'incomprehensible' that I could still ask 'was Gibbon concealing his intentions or did he not know what they were?' (Lerner, 2001, p. 9). The present chapter is designed to keep alive the possibility that he still did not know what they had been.

[340] Pocock, 2009.

The historian, it has appeared, made two advances in chapter 15 into territory which would importantly determine the future argument of the *Decline and Fall*. One was the move away from the confrontation of the Christian gospel with Hellenic philosophy, the dominant theme of Eusebian historiography as rewritten by Catholics and Protestants between 1680 and 1750, into the confrontation with Roman and Gentile polytheism that would permit a Humean narrative of enthusiasm and superstition. (Warburton and Bullet, Jenyns and Apthorp, had been able to reimagine it as a narrative of revelation.) The other was the selection of the rise of the clergy as the determining factor separating Christian from pre-Christian history; a thesis in which Protestant historiography had massively preceded Enlightened. To take the next step Gibbon must pass from the Fathers to the Councils and narrate, as Protestant Enlightenment had preceded him in doing, the rise of theological disputation to a level where emperors must take account of it. How he began doing this, uniting the themes of the first half of this volume with those of the second, must be recounted by studying a chapter in the two volumes he published in 1781.

CHAPTER II

Epilogue and prologue

(I) 1776–1781: FROM TWO CHAPTERS TO TWO VOLUMES

It was generally agreed among Gibbon's opponents that what gave offence in chapters 15 and 16 was unrelated to the history he was narrating; so much so that several of them suspected that 'attacking religion' was the true purpose of his book and chapters 1 through 14 irrelevant to it. Gibbon of course had historical purposes of his own, though to say this reopens the question of what he was doing in the offensive passages. He was writing a history of empire, in which the history of the Church played an immeasurably important part (none of his critics had yet reached the point of suggesting that he thought Christianity the cause of the Decline and Fall). He went on writing his history and pursuing his purposes, but it was five years before he published his next volumes and resumed his narrative from the point reached at the end of chapter 14. During those years the controversy over the two chapters ran its course to the point so far surveyed, and the image of Gibbon it established – an image partly dominated by the 'sneer' – was formed in the minds of readers, where it has persisted ever since. During the same period, however, the purposes with which he was writing were shaped to the point at which we find them in volumes II and III of the *Decline and Fall*, so that these years figure in both the history of Gibbon's authorship and the history of its reception, histories which from 1781 onwards draw increasingly apart.

From 1776 to 1781, there seems to be no period worth considering in which Gibbon was not thinking about and working on a volume to succeed his first, but the work proceeded at an uneven pace and was subject to delays. He needed time for rest and rethinking,[1] and for the pursuit of other intellectual interests;[2] during 1777 he spent six months in

[1] For Gibbon's account of the delay between the volumes see A, pp. 315–22 (Memoir E). He mentions his attendance at lectures on anatomy and chemistry (*Letters*, II, pp. 138–41).

[2] A, pp. 312–14; *Letters*, II, pp. 151, 152.

Paris, where he was able to read in the Bibliothèque du Roi but clearly had no time for writing;[3] on his return he was disabled for two months by gout in both feet.[4] He was worried about the problems of his inherited estates,[5] and about securing a place either in parliament or at the Board of Trade, without one of which he might have to withdraw to Lausanne.[6] During 1778 he wrote the *Vindication* and a state paper defending Britain against charges by the French;[7] and he was justly preoccupied by the course of the American war and the obligation to defend a ministry in which he had diminishing confidence.[8] All these figure as causes for delay; but the interval of five years is also to be explained by a drastic increase in his immediate ambitions as an author and the accompanying workload. We know little of its origins, but during 1779 his letters indicate a decision to write and publish a third volume as well as a second, and to carry his narrative as far as the loss of imperial control over Rome itself and the western provinces.[9] He hoped to publish these volumes during 1780, but in the event did so in the early months of 1781.

The decision (whenever taken) to proceed to this third volume was of moment in the history of Gibbon's writing the *Decline and Fall*. In prefacing the volume of 1776 he had identified the period from Trajan to the loss of the west as the first of three stages in the story of decline – the others being that from Justinian to Charlemagne, witnessing the rise of Islam and the establishment by the popes of a western empire (the double triumph of Antichrist seen by Apthorp and Taylor as foretold in the Apocalypse) and that narrating the long centuries of east Roman survival, with which the processes of history shaped by western thought were to have so little to do. He had added, and repeated in a preface to the two volumes of 1781, that he would undertake an obligation to 'the Public' to complete a narrative of the first of these stages, but that whether he would go on to the second and third must depend on his own capacities and inclinations, and on the Public's responses.[10] By the end of 1779 he had decided to discharge his obligation, and in 1781 said that he had done so.

[3] *Letters*, II, pp. 163–5.
[4] Ibid., II, pp. 118, 126, 179–80, 185, 193–4, 201–2, 108–10. It recurred in 1780, pp. 238–41.
[5] A, pp. 320–2, 221 and n. 222.
[6] Gibbon, 1779; *Letters*, II, pp. 224, 229–30. For the abolition of the Board of Trade, p. 239; for the loss of his parliamentary seat, pp. 248–53; its recovery, p. 257.
[7] *Letters*, II, pp. 156–7, 160, 167–9, 174–5. For a detailed history of Gibbon's life during these years, see Craddock, EGLH, Part II.
[8] A, pp. 324–5; *Letters*, II, pp. 242–4.
[9] *Letters*, II, pp. 223, 225, 233, 240.
[10] Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 1–3; NCG, pp. 372–4, 377–80.

The two volumes of 1781 might – though in retrospect it is easy to see that they never would – have been the end of the *Decline and Fall*, and Gibbon signalled this by inserting at the end of them the separately written 'General reflections on the fall of the Roman empire in the west'. It was in fact seven years before he published the volumes which cover the second and third stages of his original plan, and by 1788 he was living in Lausanne and writing the very different kind of history – perhaps he never decided what it was – called for as he moved away from western Europe. The volumes of 1781 therefore constitute a climax, to be followed by an anticlimax, and their content and structure call for careful study. Their theme is barbarism and religion, appearing concurrently for the first time. Volume II as we have it – there is little evidence regarding the history of its composition – presents the imperial system established by Constantine, as well ecclesiastical as civil, and proceeds through the disintegration of his dynasty to the climactic reign of Julian the Apostate, in which Julian the neo-Platonist and Athanasius the Trinitarian will present the first great contest of personalities in the *Decline and Fall*. Julian's successors confront new and menacing barbarian invasions and undergo the disasters of 375–410; but the partial recovery under Theodosius reintroduces the theme of religion, as Christianity destroys cultic polytheism at the price of becoming a cultic religion itself. The theme of barbarism returns with the Gothic, Vandal and Frankish invasions that end with the loss of Roman control over western Europe and Mediterranean Africa, and Gibbon stands at the beginning of 'the Christian Millennium' and 'the Enlightened narrative',[11] the point at which it would have been so easy to think his work done.

There remained, however, the linked problems of the history of Christianity and of Christian history itself, about which Gibbon was determined to remain silent, for the reason that he had irreversibly raised both by publishing chapters 15 and 16 in 1776. Any historical study of the *Decline and Fall* must consider what more he said, did not say or could not help saying under both heads. A further volume of *Barbarism and Religion* will examine the structure and formation of the two volumes published in 1781, but there are moments in the first of these which call for study here, because they show Gibbon coming to grips with themes of Christian historiography he had not confronted in 1776, and dealing with them in ways that modify our account of him as a historian of Christianity.

[11] NCG, passim.

(II) THE CONVERSION OF CONSTANTINE AND THE RETURN TO PHILOSOPHY

Chapters 17 to 19 of volume II survey the regime and city of Constantine, followed by the disintegration of his dynasty, through the early career of Julian, the hero or semi-hero of the remainder of the volume. Chapters 20 and 21 form an interlude, in which as usual the history of religion and the Church offers themes other than those of imperial history. Taken together, however, the five chapters inaugurate a new history, that of Christian empire; and the latter two culminate at a point earlier indicated by chapters 15 and 16, the emergence of a Christian clergy exercising an authority not that of the emperor. To explore this enormous innovation in full would be to embark on the study of the 1781 volumes, and is therefore deferred; but Gibbon has no sooner begun upon it than he is required to locate Constantine in the context of a *historia ecclesiastica* that forms the first part of this volume but from which we turned away with Gibbon when he began writing chapter 15. Whether orthodox or not, the ecclesiastical historians were concerned with orthodoxy and heresy, and placed the origins of the latter in the encounters of the apostolic mission with Hellenist philosophy. Gibbon's concerns were different; he explained the missionary zeal of the early Christians by their rejection of polytheist civility, and Roman persecution by the intolerance of the Christians. The rejection of the gods, however, occurred at a time when philosophy was present as well as faith, and the two combined to render religion doctrinal as well as cultic, and intolerance among Christians possible for the first time. As Constantine comes to accept Christianity, he encounters the problems of faith and toleration, and we join Gibbon in returning to the history of faith and philosophy.

During chapter 20 Gibbon deals with Constantine's conversion to Christianity. He considers the freethinking argument that an ambitious warlord was moved by practical calculation and reason of state, but adds in a manner possibly Humean that we must not fail to remember that people often believe what they say.[12] Having sceptically observed that

> the frequent repetition of miracles serves to provoke, where it does not subdue, the reason of mankind,[13]

so that doubt remains no less possible than superstitious belief, he goes on, some pages later:

[12] Womersley, 1994, I, p. 743. [13] Ibid., p. 739.

Nor can it be deemed incredible that the mind of an unlettered soldier should have yielded to the weight of evidence which, in a more enlightened age, has satisfied or subdued the reason of a Grotius, a Pascal, or a Locke.[14]

These are names of the greatest weight, the heralds of a philosophy which has replaced Platonism and scholasticism and imposed enlightenment by asking what the empirical intellect can find to say about God; yet all three accepted Christ – and the evidences for him? – and the presence of Pascal among them raises a further problem. Gibbon in the autobiographies tells us it was from Pascal that he learned the use of the 'grave and temperate irony'[15] which all his adversaries took to be a sneer at faith; but he cannot have failed to notice that in Pascal's hands it is as likely to appear on the fideist as on the sceptical side of the equation. What then is the force of the word 'subdued'? Can Gibbon mean that when the reason of the great modern philosophers takes the step into faith, it has merely been coerced into believing what it knows it should not? He is not himself going to take that step, but we may credit him – perhaps as a historian – with using language ambivalent enough to convey that he saw some way into its nature.

The gap between modern and ancient philosophy, mentioned only here, widens when we read:

The sublime theory of the Gospel –

a choice of words that might be examined –

had made a much fainter impression on the heart than on the understanding of Constantine himself . . . Instead of asserting his just superiority above the imperfect heroism and profane philosophy of Trajan and the Antonines –

an exercise in irony? a concession to Tillemont or Apthorp?

the mature age of Constantine forfeited the reputation which he had acquired in his youth. As he gradually advanced in the knowledge of truth, he proportionably declined in the practice of virtue; and the same year of his reign in which he convened the council of Nice was polluted by the execution, or rather murder, of his eldest son.[16]

It is Barbeyrac's point; theology has less and less to do with morality; but the words that open the last sentence quoted take on new meaning at the beginning of chapter 21.

The edict of Milan, the great charter of toleration, had confirmed to each individual of the Roman world the privilege of choosing and professing his own religion.

[14] Ibid., p. 744. [15] A, p. 143 (Memoir B). [16] Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 746–7.

But this inestimable privilege was soon violated; with the knowledge of truth the emperor imbibed the maxims of persecution; and the sects which dissented from the catholic church were afflicted and oppressed by the triumph of Christianity.[17]

A chorus of voices may be heard affirming that the words 'the knowledge of truth' are here no more than a sneer, and they have a resonance of scepticism. But the historian as well as the philosopher is to be heard making the point that it is when we claim to know the truth about God that the problem of toleration becomes thinkable, but when God is proclaimed in a culture of philosophy this claim has to be made. Constantine the persecutor is not interchangeable with Constantine the filicide, however; the death of Crispus was the product of palace politics, not theological disputation.

The emperor encounters the problem of toleration from the moment when Christianity becomes part of the structure of his authority. Initially, there is the question whether the new religion will tolerate the old; he begins to repress the cults of polytheism as soon as he ceases to take part in them. But this is not the problem that is beginning to take shape. Polytheism is not a body of doctrines, except in so far as philosophers and Christians define belief in the gods as doctrine, and it is only with the union of monotheism and philosophy that the question whether one doctrine concerning God can tolerate another will be asked. Constantine discovers that the religion he is making his own is already divided into sects; Gibbon uses this word in both its ancient and its modern senses. In Africa there are surviving Montanists and aggressive Donatists, heretics in the ecclesiological sense that they deny the authority and legitimacy of all churches and bishops but their own; and there are gnostics in process of becoming Manichaeans, whose beliefs are so far from orthodoxy that Gibbon like others does not say much about them.[18] It is not here that the problem of heresy and toleration is to be found in full development, and Gibbon makes a historiographically important departure in saying where it is.

The schism of the Donatists was confined to Africa; the more diffusive mischief of the Trinitarian controversy successively penetrated into every part of the Christian world. The former was an accidental quarrel, occasioned by the abuse of freedom; the latter was a high and mysterious argument, derived from the abuse of philosophy. From the age of Constantine to that of Clovis and Theodoric, the temporal interests both of the Romans and barbarians were deeply involved in the theological disputes of Arianism. The historian may therefore be permitted

[17] Ibid., p. 766. [18] Ibid., pp. 766–7.

respectfully to withdraw the veil of the sanctuary, and to deduce the progress of reason and faith, of error and passion, from the school of Plato to the decline and fall of the empire.[19]

Like the opening of chapter 15, this is one of the grand moments at which Gibbon signals a change of key in his narrative, and it might almost be read as establishing a causal relation between Platonism and the Decline and Fall. Certainly, he is looking beyond the end of empire in the west when he indicates that barbarism became entangled with religion, and that it mattered historically whether the kingdoms established in the lost provinces were Arian like those of the Vandals and Goths, or Catholic and Trinitarian like that of the Franks. It is of more immediate importance, however, that Gibbon has returned to the mainstream of ecclesiastical history, and is now narrating it in terms of the interaction between gospel and philosophy. There are reasons beside the need to explain the origins of intolerance why he has done so.

He proceeds, in language that must remind us of Beausobre – whom, however, he does not here cite – to relate how

> The genius of Plato, informed by his own meditation or by the traditional knowledge of the priests of Egypt, had ventured to explore the mysterious nature of the Deity. When he had elevated his mind to the sublime contemplation of the first self-existent, necessary cause of the universe, the Athenian sage was incapable of conceiving *how* the simple unity of his essence could admit the infinite variety of distinct and successive ideas which compose the model of the intellectual world; *how* a Being purely incorporeal could execute that perfect model, and mould with a plastic hand the rude and independent chaos. The vain hope of extricating himself from these difficulties, which must ever oppress the feeble powers of the human mind, might induce Plato to consider the divine nature under the threefold modification[20] of the first cause, the reason or *Logos*, and the soul or spirit of the universe. His poetical imagination sometimes fixed and animated these metaphysical abstractions; the three *archical* or original principles were represented in the Platonic system as three Gods, united with each other by a mysterious and ineffable generation; and the Logos was particularly considered under the more accessible character of the Son of an Eternal Father, and the Creator and Governor of the World.[21]

The Platonic trinity makes its way to Alexandria, where it is adopted by Jews and especially Philo, writing before or during the life of Christ. Cudworth, Basnage, Le Clerc and Brucker are among Gibbon's sources,

[19] Ibid., pp. 770–1. [20] A punctuation mark occurs here in most editions, but seems better omitted.
[21] Ibid., p. 771. Gibbon's emphasis.

and he cites Petavius and Bull on the almost pre-Christian antiquity of Trinitarian doctrine.[22] However:

> The eloquence of Plato, the name of Solomon, the authority of the school of Alexandria, and the consent of the Jews and Greeks, were insufficient to establish the truth of a mysterious doctrine, which might please, but could not satisfy, a rational mind. A prophet, or apostle, inspired by the Deity, can alone exercise a lawful dominion over the faith of mankind: and the theology of Plato might have been for ever confounded with the philosophical visions of the Academy, the Porch, and the Lyceum, if the name and divine attributes of the *Logos* had not been confirmed by the celestial pen of the last and most sublime of the Evangelists. The Christian revelation, which was consummated under the reign of Nerva, disclosed to the world the amazing secret, that the LOGOS, who was with God from the beginning, and was God, who had made all things, and for whom all things had been made, was incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth; who had been born of a virgin, and suffered death on the cross.[23]

There seems to be no contemporary literature in which these paragraphs are denounced as instances of Gibbon's sneer. A note of irony is audible, and the ultimate revelation looks like the historical consequence of a work of the human imagination, but Gibbon had rejoined a mainstream in which Greek apprehension of the Logos was thought a divine illumination if not revelation, and the Enlightened injunction that the mind should not accept what it could not reach was not far removed from Le Clerc's insistence that the nature of God could not be expressed in human language.[24] He had further avoided the misstep of chapter 15: that of leaving revelation sidelined and undefined, so that everything he said was supposed to be aimed at its denial. Here was a detailed account of what it was and how it had happened, stating the orthodox doctrine clearly enough to leave Gibbon's evident doubts about it almost a secondary matter, and leading to a history of debate over Christ's nature[25] full and thoughtful enough – it is almost a digest of Petavius – to satisfy an orthodox reader who might otherwise question Gibbon's position. Having laid down that the concept of incarnation opened up an abyss[26] of definitions without a bottom, he went on to define the main problems to which it might lead and the main doctrines that might be adopted; and if he did not conceal his conviction that the pursuit was vain because it was unending, he did not

[22] Ibid., pp. 771 n. 12, and 773 n. 17.
[23] Womersley, 1994, I, p. 773. Cerinthus is not mentioned, but Gibbon notes that John was thought to have written to confound both the Ebionites and the gnostics.
[24] Above, pp. 103, 113–14.
[25] Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 775–8, 780–2. [26] This word first appears on p. 775.

say or imply that it was nonsensical.[27] Given certain postulates, these were the alternatives. The error into which almost all disputants fell was that of supposing that one of them was true, and the others false; this was the source of intolerance, and of what Gibbon meant by 'the abuse of philosophy'. That there might be a deeper abuse, committed by Plato in the first place and by John the Evangelist after him, could be inferred from what Gibbon says; but he needed neither to say nor to abstain from saying it. Having stated the central Christian revelation in orthodox terms and supplied it with a history, he could go on to relate the history of attempts to define it. A revelation is not made to be defined, but to be experienced and believed; it is, however, made to people some of whom cannot believe it without defining it, and some are more concerned to define than to believe. It is evident enough that Gibbon did not believe – the believer might still detect his unbelief and suppose that he wrote history in order to convey it – but in chapter 20 he reached the point where he could write of belief as history. In so doing, he passed beyond Hugh Blair's criticism. 'Attacking religion' was no longer 'unhistorical and not to the purpose', and his purpose was not to attack religion but to write its history.

That history was no longer – if it ever had been – that of a group of secondary causes, abetting or diminishing a primary revelation; it was now that of how Christians had debated the primary revelation itself, as stated in Johannine terms. The debate and its history were very ancient, to some as old as the Apostles and older than John's Gospel. It had later been conducted by the Fathers and the Councils, and Gibbon was about to study its effects on the empire itself. It had also gone on, chiefly among Protestants, for the hundred years or so preceding the *Decline and Fall* – Gibbon's modern authorities were participants in this debate – as one group after another, obeying the Enlightened imperative that grace should never disturb the law of civil society, had moved away from the Nicene Trinitarianism recognised as orthodoxy, towards views of Christ's nature as increasingly human: from Arianism and other ancient heresies to Socinianism, deism and scepticism. Gibbon is visibly a participant in this process, to the extent that he is its historian and sees its history as beginning with the debate leading to Nicaea; one cannot be its historian without adopting a view of Christ's nature, even if undefined; but at this point he takes an unexpected step.

[27] Cf., however, A, p. 315 (not published in his lifetime) 'I dived perhaps too deeply into the mud of the Arian controversy; and many days of reading, thinking, and writing were consumed in the pursuit of a phantom.' He nevertheless did the research he describes. On p. 794 of the Womersley edition he writes of 'the dark and empty abyss'; does he mean only that God is not to be found by definition, or that God is not to be found at all?

To historicise that nature was normally to humanise it, and one might expect to find Gibbon – as his critics generally had – in the company of those, from Arians like Isaac Newton to deists like Bolingbroke, who had seen themselves as moving away from Trinitarianism and especially from Athanasius, the Athanasian Creed and the so-called 'damnatory clauses' in the Church of England's Thirty-Nine Articles. To the majority of anti-Trinitarians, Athanasius was the prime antagonist,[28] and even those, like Le Clerc and Arthur Bury,[29] who thought Arius and Athanasius equally mistaken, were inclined to blame the Alexandrian Trinitarians for starting the controversy.

We might expect Gibbon to follow suit, and to find him somewhere on the spectrum from Arianism to scepticism; even his historicisation of the controversy might appear a vehicle for the latter position. In fact it runs deeper and has an unexpected outcome. Chapter 20 proceeds through a detailed, insightful and to that extent sympathetic account of the various positions open to those confronting the 'abyss' of the Incarnation, to a narrative of the actions of the Council of Nicaea and the emperors Constantine and Constantius. This culminates in a lengthy portrait, at times nearly a panegyric, of none other than Athanasius, whose theology is part of his greatness as a historical actor.

> The immortal name of Athanasius will never be separated from the catholic doctrine of the Trinity, to whose defence he consecrated every moment and every faculty of his being . . . almost every province of the Roman empire was successively witness to his merit, and his sufferings in the cause of the Homoousion, which he considered as the sole pleasure and business, as the duty and as the glory of his life. Amidst the storms of persecution, the archbishop of Alexandria was patient of labour, jealous of fame, careless of safety; and although his mind was tainted by the contagion of fanaticism, Athanasius displayed a superiority of character and abilities which would have qualified him, far better than the degenerate sons of Constantine, for the government of a great monarchy.[30]

Gibbon goes on, here and elsewhere, to an encomium upon the statesmanlike qualities Athanasius will display as an adversary not only of the intermittently Arian Constans and Constantius, but later of the neo-pagan Julian.[31] He becomes a near-heroic figure in the *Decline and Fall*, and

[28] For the campaign by Isaac Newton in private and William Whiston in public to convict him of forging the doctrine of the Trinity, see conveniently Force, 1985.
[29] Above, pp. 99–109.
[30] Womersley, 1994, I, p. 796. Barnes, 1993, for a less glorious modern portrait.
[31] Womersley 1994, I, pp. 797–8, 809–14, 904–5, 960–1, 983–4.

will reappear, several volumes later, as part of Gibbon's unexpectedly positive account of the medieval papacy.[32] Against the grain of Protestant Enlightenment, Gibbon has chosen to elevate an orthodox Trinitarian and ecclesiastical politician, and what he says of Athanasius's secular virtues does not diminish or dismiss what he has to say of his orthodoxy. Though resolute in the cause of the Homoousion to a point beyond reason and tainted with fanaticism,[33] Athanasius is capable of

> the rational apprehension . . . that the restless activity of the clergy, who wandered round the empire in search of the true faith, would excite the contempt and laughter of the unbelieving world,[34]

and

> has candidly confessed that, whenever he forced his understanding to meditate on the divinity of the *Logos*, his toilsome and unavailing efforts recoiled on themselves; that the more he thought, the less he comprehended; and the more he wrote, the less capable he was of expressing his thoughts. In every step of the inquiry,

Gibbon continues,

> we are compelled to feel and acknowledge the immeasurable disproportion between the size of the object and the capacity of the human mind. We may strive to abstract the notions of time, of space, and of matter, which so closely adhere to all the perceptions of our experimental knowledge. But as soon as we presume to reason of infinite substance, of spiritual generation, as often as we deduce any positive conclusions from a negative idea, we are involved in darkness, perplexity, and inevitable contradiction.[35]

Gibbon is stating the Enlightenment reasons for not engaging in Christian theology, but he does not join Le Clerc (still less Voltaire) in reducing it to meaningless birdsong. He is engaged in recognising and saluting a great intellect and personality, who knew what risks he was running but was impelled by the conjunction of faith and philosophy to go on exploring the abyss of the Trinity; and Gibbon is impelled to praise Athanasius by the demands of his own historical imagination. His position has become historicist; but to recognise faith and Platonism as historical realities is not to share either of them, and the former at least continues to make demands. We may look past the volumes of 1781 to the last and bitterest of Gibbon's religious controversies: that with Joseph Priestley, a radical unitarian who

[32] Ibid., III, p. 504 n. 83.
[33] Ibid., I, pp. 796, 'his mind was tainted by the contagion of fanaticism'; p. 807, 'if reason was indeed on the side of Athanasius'.
[34] Ibid., p. 794. [35] Ibid., pp. 775–6.

thought Platonism the chief cause of 'the corruptions of Christianity', but insisted on the divine, prophetic and apocalyptic foundations of a merely human Christ's mission as God's messenger.[36] Gibbon does not deride such convictions, but reduces them to actions in history. Priestley, therefore, may be subject to the decisions of the civil magistrate.

(iii) christian revelation and the course of history

In chapter 20, then, Gibbon overcame the structural weakness of chapter 15. He gave an account of the Christian revelation which Christians could understand and of which he could write the history. He did not conceal his own unbelief, indicating that his reason was neither satisfied nor subdued by the Christian engagement with the abyss of God's nature, and this continued to give offence. It did not, however, prevent him from writing history, and to reduce revelation to its history was less disturbing (if in the end more radical) than to write a history whose defects made it seem an attack on revelation by indirect means. He could proceed to write a history of empire in which the history of debate over revelation played a major part. In volume III, however – its narrative has still to be studied – Gibbon turned back from the history of philosophy to that of polytheism, relating how the destruction of pagan cults was followed by the rise of the cult of saints and relics, and Christianity was transformed from a religion of enthusiasm into one of superstition. This will have long-term consequences in the history of the papacy, but the theology of the abyss will not recur until the end of volume IV in 1788, when Petavius and Le Clerc, Beausobre and Mosheim, are mobilised in chapter 47 to provide a history of the debate over Christ's nature leading to the Monophysite controversy and the Council of Chalcedon. In a further set of world-historical consequences, we are shown how the ensuing alienation of the Syrian and Egyptian churches points the way to the Arab conquests related in volume V. In chapter 50, it may be proleptically suggested, we reach the climax of the history begun in chapter 20, when the Johannine declaration that Christ is the only-begotten Son of his Father is met by the Muslim counter-statement that God is not begotten, neither does he beget.[37] Gibbon had control over this narrative; but the doctrine of his apocalyptic critics that Islam and the

[36] Priestley, 1782; Womersley, 1997b, pp. 235–59; Turnbull, 1991.

[37] The present writer will not readily forget a visit to the Basilica of St John at Selçuk near Ephesus. He was standing before the reputed tomb of the Fourth Evangelist and last Apostle when the minarets in the valley began sounding the Muslim call to prayer. Gibbon hearing the friars singing on the Capitol did not experience a richer moment.

papacy were two limbs of the Antichrist foretold in Revelation is replaced by the Enlightened account he will give of how the French kingdom became Catholic, not Arian, and the popes' ally. This is the crucial step in the formation of a post-Roman western Europe. Gibbon never wrote the post-medieval history in which his own history and historiography were formed; but after what may now be regarded as a false step in 1776, he was laying its foundations in his work of 1781. This is the conclusion to which a study of ecclesiastical history and his role in it points. As for his unbelief, he is saying in the last analysis that reason tells him not to attempt what reason cannot do; but he knows that this is precisely what the believer is willing to attempt. Theological disputation, the problem of intolerance and the rise of the clergy are historical consequences of the turn to faith.

Constantine's move to the Bosphorus completes the story of the abandonment of Rome by its empire, but entangles imperial history in that of revelation and Greek philosophy. Gibbon is already anxious to return to the Latin west, preferring to study the Christian destruction of polytheism, which will be completed under Theodosius. Warburton and Apthorp have shown how the Christian revelation superseded the sociable religions of the Mediterranean cities. The loss of the western provinces will conduct both barbarism and religion into a world more European than Roman, but dominated among other forces by the legacy of the Mission to the Gentiles. Papacy and Islam will figure in the story, but Gibbon will not reach them until the volumes of 1788.

Envoi

This volume has been almost exclusively concerned with religion, and with Gibbon's involvement in its history. It has been only marginally concerned with empire, and not at all with barbarism – though introduced by a passage from the *Decline and Fall* in which Gibbon remarks on the triumph of Christianity among the incoming barbarians as well as the settled populations of the empire. These themes will need to be resumed.

In concluding *Barbarians, Savages and Empires* – the fourth volume of *Barbarism and Religion* – the reader was advised[1] that the present volume would be followed by a sixth, intended to conclude the series and provisionally entitled *The Redefinition of Europe* (a title which will probably survive as the heading of a section). The series will arrive at the end of the volumes Gibbon published in 1781, when he reached what he considered the fall of the Roman empire in the west and most of his readers have considered the end or climax of the Decline and Fall as they are concerned with it. In his narrative, the concept of 'Europe' will be seen moving west with the barbarians, as they ascend the Danube valley, break down the Rhine frontier, and become dominant in Gaul, Britain, upper Italy, Spain and Africa. Gibbon can be seen considering how the Roman and barbaric histories of these provinces can be brought together as constituting the history of 'Europe' as that term has been used from his time to ours.

It will be a neo-Latin history, both because the post-Roman civility with which the barbarians interact uses Latin and its vernaculars, and because the Christian religion they adopt will be that of Rome and the Latin rite, governed by an increasingly powerful papacy. Gibbon thinks it of cardinal importance, not only that the barbarians became Christians, but that the Franks, unlike the Goths and Vandals, became Trinitarian Catholics rather than Arians. He emphasises this in his volumes of 1781, but does not until those of 1788 arrive at the alliance between the popes and the Frankish

[1] BSE, pp. 340–2.

kingdom, in which a new empire was founded in the west and the themes of medieval history were laid down.

'The triumph of barbarism and religion', as Gibbon used the phrase at the very end of the *Decline and Fall*,[2] was not fully consummated in the volumes of 1781; but there are reasons for breaking off at that time the present series, of which it supplies the title. By the time Gibbon employed it, his imagination had returned to the view from the Capitol where he tells us his enterprise began; but between 1781 and 1788 he allowed a hiatus longer than that between his first and second volumes, and equally momentous in a different way. As he had foreseen, he did not take up the 'Enlightened narrative' as these volumes have called it,[3] already related by others and pursuing neo-Latin history through papacy and empire, Reformation and Counter-Reformation, to a climax in Enlightenment, commerce and global empire. He chose to follow the imperative of his title through east Roman history from Orthodox to Ottoman, in the course of which the meanings of 'barbarism' and 'religion' would lose their previously western significations; Christianity would be confronted by Islam, Franks, Goths, Vandals and Saxons compared to Arabs, Turks, Slavs and Mongols. These were radically different histories; it is far from certain that Gibbon resolved on ways of dealing with them, or that European historiography as history has shaped it offered him the means of doing so. The project of interpreting the *Decline and Fall* by situating it in contexts supplied by eighteenth-century historiography may or may not remain valid, and the volumes of 1788 seem best left to separate treatment and very likely to other hands.

[2] Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1068.
[3] See particularly vol. II of this series (NCG).

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